

Introduction

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What follows is composed of papers first presented 6–7 April 2001 at a symposium held by the Forbes Center for Research in Culture and Media Studies at Brown University.¹ This symposium, “Benjamin Now: Critical Encounters with *The Arcades Project*,” was provoked by the 1999 English-language translation of Walter Benjamin’s monumental *Das Passagen-Werk*, the most legendary work of the most legendary of twentieth-century cultural interpreters and theorists. There was also a new and (as of this writing) ongoing multivolume set of translations appearing as Benjamin’s *Selected Writings* from Harvard University Press. While focused on *The Arcades*, then, the symposium implicitly considered the extent to which the English-language academy has a “new” Benjamin on its hands. We thought, as my co-organizer Kevin McLaughlin puts it in his afterword, that “*now* might be an opportune moment for a reconsideration of the critical work of Walter Benjamin.”

1. I am responsible for the overall tenor and substance of this introduction, but a few of its paragraphs include specific wording that is heavily inflected by Kevin McLaughlin’s contributions to symposium-related documents. I am grateful for his collaboration and generosity.

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Our “now”—not Benjamin’s. McLaughlin is implicitly referring to Benjamin’s concept of *Jetztzeit*, the “now-time,” the point at which objects, activities, and actions from the past may be cognized in a unique and heretofore unrecognizable constellation, as an image, a figure. For Benjamin, this dialectical image manifests a knowledge uniquely available to a specific present moment that will then pass. It is precious because it is generated by and includes the desires, needs, and contexts of the present and so can be lost if not formulated now. It is also precious because although an image, it conveys a knowledge that is in some fundamental sense rigorous. This is not an obvious or simple concept. But I admit that I reflexively imagine that the essential question of this collection of essays might be formulated in something of a Benjaminian manner: What previously unrecognized cognitions will flash up from our new encounter with *The Arcades Project*, as cognitions about Benjamin’s work that make available something new of the dangers and the dreams, the forgotten and the remembered, of his time, but also and simultaneously of our own?

Benjamin addresses this kind of question to the remarkable abundance of textual fragments he quotes as traces of the Paris of a previous generation, the Paris he named capital of the nineteenth century. This conjunction of historical time and geopolitical space is indicative. The years during which Benjamin conceived and worked through *The Arcades Project* were years of some of the most extraordinary political, social, and intellectual crises of the twentieth century. In formulating his own answers to his question, he was working not only on the objects of study, nineteenth-century Paris and, more broadly, the inception of modern culture and society. He was also working through the conceptual, linguistic, and interpretive means by which he and his generation might understand culture and society—that is, the subject in an epistemological sense. Clearly both of these sides, object and subject, have their histories and their politics.

What is our situation now, as subjects confronting *The Arcades Project* as an object? It may appear that we are in a qualitatively different position and context from Benjamin’s. Many political and theoretical questions that engaged him—about culture, textuality and language, modernity and society, knowledge and history—however compelling, can seem significantly distinct from ours simply because there has been an ongoing history of politics, theory, and criticism since his death. (And certainly, most of us in the First World academy, where the interest in Benjamin is so intense, work in very different circumstances than did he.) Yet Benjamin teaches us to watch not only for irreducible particularity and radical novelty but also

for symptoms and compulsions of repetition and return in that very particularity and novelty. For example, Benjamin and certain colleagues attributed crises they lived to sociopolitical and sociocultural systems whose economics, aesthetics, and social fantasies were structured by war. As I am writing this, it is almost impossible to avoid asking whether we are living at a moment that is in the process of unveiling its own forms of perpetual crisis and war. But this is not to call on Benjamin in the name of an immediacy of “relevance,” an immediacy I suspect he would abhor; his time was not only the same but different. It is better to begin elsewhere. In unique and original ways, Benjamin engaged fundamental problems bearing on culture, textuality and language, modernity and society, politics and history. Even though he lived and worked in a different time, there is a drive in his corpus that seems recognizable now, something that draws our present to him. The first problem is to convert such recognizability into cognition. This means not allowing the strange object that is *The Arcades Project* to become too familiar too quickly.

For it has received a remarkable welcome. The appearance of a full and integral English translation of *Das Passagen-Werk* in 1999 was widely treated as a major intellectual event, attracting notice even in nonspecialized venues such as the *New York Times*, the *Nation*, and the *London Review of Books*. In the scholarly world, *The Arcades Project* is almost certainly in the process of becoming canonical. But part of what makes the translation of this legendary text so significant is that certain of Benjamin’s other writings were already canonical.

In his own lifetime, Benjamin’s importance was acknowledged mostly in highly distinguished but relatively restricted European intellectual circles. (The plural is important, for it has always been difficult to categorize Benjamin neatly or align him with a single mode or school of thought.) After his notorious suicide, committed in 1940 while fleeing the German invasion of France, some key members of these circles—including Gershom Scholem, Theodor Adorno, Hannah Arendt, and Georges Bataille—were involved in preserving his work and then promoting his legacy. After the war, their labors eventually resulted in a much wider sphere of appreciation. The take-off point was perhaps the 1961 German publication of a one-volume selection from his writings (previously collected in two volumes in 1955) under the title *Illuminations*. In the English-speaking world, a crucial moment was the translation of a somewhat different selection chosen by Arendt and also published as *Illuminations* in 1968. It may be worth noting that the distribution of Benjamin’s work in the English language began during a historically par-

ticular configuration of dangers and dreams, comprised in part by the conjuncture of political upheavals and related student rebellions now so insufficiently summarized as “the sixties,” and the academic theory boom that was simultaneously being unleashed.

Considered as a scholarly writer, Benjamin worked in an astonishingly wide variety of fields, including literary criticism (or comparative literature) and theory, hermeneutics, history and historiography, philosophy and language theory, sociocultural theory, mass media and visual arts, mass culture and urban studies. *Illuminations* contained major essays in all of these, including some that drew on material from the as yet unavailable *Arcades Project*. Almost immediately several became standard reading in the burgeoning interdisciplinary theorization of culture and modernity that cut across several critical studies disciplines, and some were soon cited as foundational for conceptualizing the postmodern *avant la lettre*. More translations followed in the 1970s, as the set of available Benjamin texts were deployed in important debates in several fields. But at least in the English-speaking world, this status was originally achieved on the basis of a small proportion of his writings.

Now, however, Benjamin’s legacy may undergo a major reassessment. The Harvard edition is making available a much wider array of his writings and is also retranslating some already available texts, thus providing a more complete picture of his diverse oeuvre. By all accounts, it seems to be extending his impact even further. English readers familiar with Benjamin the Marxian interpreter of the mass media and modern literature have found themselves confronted with a participant in the early twentieth-century neo-Kantian debates about language and a leader of the German student movement as well as a Berlin memoirist and collector of children’s books. But amid the renewed upsurge of interest in Benjamin set off by the appearance in English of this enlarged body of work, nothing has been subject to greater anticipation than the translation of his last great work, the unfinished, post-humous *Arcades Project*.

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Reading *The Arcades Project* now is a daunting task, beginning from a fundamental difficulty with the very form in which *Das Passagen-Werk* comes to us. Attitudes toward this difficulty inflect all discussions of it. Benjamin’s interest in the literary or critical fragment, the aphorism, and like modes of expression is here combined with an unprecedented mass of extracted quotations. Organized as an extensive set of folios or “convolutes”

on different topics, much of *The Arcades Project* consists of elaborate, strategic citations from a wide variety of works originating in or commenting on nineteenth-century Paris. These citations originate in a heterogeneous multiplicity of genres, ranging from poems and novels to police reports, travel guides, and advertisements, as well as works of criticism, history, philosophy, and social theory. They stem from or refer to an uncountable number of cultural and social practices and historical figures: Charles Baudelaire and Marcel Proust, Nietzschean eternal return and Marxian dialectics, Auguste Blanqui and Charles Fourier, the street plan of Paris and street names, politics and revolutions, urban gardens and department stores, the interior of the bourgeois domicile and bourgeois subjectivity, commodification and phantasmagoria, *Jugendstil* and the cartoons of Grandville, photography and fashion, iron and glass construction in architecture, the gambler and the collector, colonialism and prostitution.²

Yet this conglomeration of extracts presents itself as an account of the crystallization of nineteenth-century European capitalist modernity, focused through the lens of the cultural, intellectual, political, and everyday social life of Paris. Not only do the extracts, which are filed by topic, succeed one another in ways that often form implicit patterns of cross-pertinence and association (which supplement explicit cross-references to other entries that are sometimes noted in the text). Nested within the mass of citations are notes and luminous commentaries by Benjamin that establish this goal. Furthermore, these commentaries include theoretical, generalizing indications. Whatever their immediate significance within a given convolute, then, they also evince Benjamin's ambition for a methodological and philosophical breakthrough in modes of historicization as well as the conceptualization of modern culture and society. On the one hand, much of the content of the convolutes may seem to suggest the epistemological fantasy that nineteenth-century Paris, the object of study, is presenting itself through its own products and traces. This sometimes leads to questions of

2. An account of the peculiarities of this text could go on. For example, Benjamin compiled his entries not only in German but equally in French, some in translation and some not. (The English-language edition has usefully translated all into English, with typographical indications as to which language was originally used.) This is a reminder of something obvious but easy to forget as we look at the carefully designed Harvard edition: To read *The Arcades Project* now is not to read it as anyone could have read it in Benjamin's own lifetime. The folios contained sheaves of handwritten transcriptions and commentaries. Only after Benjamin's death and an editorial decipherment could anyone else claim to read it. Indeed, only after some of his work became standard reading in the critical disciplines was *The Arcades Project* made into a book.

voice, a difficulty in inferring an evaluative attitude toward some extracts. On the other hand, this fantasy is short-circuited, for elements of the whole also seem to drive at conceptual and even philosophical goals. Speaking schematically, these two impulses are manifested formally as the extremes of citation (letting the object or state of being from the past speak for itself) and of commentary (asserting the activity of the epistemological subject to speak in the present around and through the historical object).

This conjoining of past and present is therefore a problem at the heart of reading this text. But clearly this is something that goes to the heart of any claim to historicize. Nineteenth-century Paris is no more. It can be encountered only in the repetitive drive to construct and re-construct it inferentially from the traces the past leaves for the present to interrogate—that which conventional historiography would call primary source documents. The German historicism Benjamin identifies as an opponent aims to hierarchize and select from the mass of such “documents,” in order to relegate them to the status of evidence for the past existence of a definitive, synthesizing historical sequence. This is to sublimate their peculiarities and particularities under the umbrella temporality of the already achieved sequence that bears “what has been,” thereby fixating and fixing the flow of time. Of course there is some selection and hierarchy in the cited material that composes so much of *The Arcades Project*. But the sheer bulk of citations is itself a formal blockage to any smooth historiographic sublimation. The form of the text foregrounds the “documents,” refusing to subsume them under a sublimating umbrella temporality. But in that case the problem becomes the nature of the alternatives for incorporating traces of the past, and ultimately for knowing history.

A concise synopsis or reduction of *The Arcades Project* into a small number of generative theses may well seem illegitimate in the face of its heterogeneous multiplicity. And yet, what would then be the status of those generalizing concepts and figures that Benjamin invents and develops, and that are so often invoked as examples of his methodological, critical, and philosophical originality? The mass of citations is intermittently informed—sometimes clearly, sometimes cryptically, sometimes critically—by key formulations of some of Benjamin’s own theoretical and historiographic ideas and concepts, such as historical affinities and constellations, trace and aura, homogenous empty time and “now-time” [*Jetztzeit*], monad, the flaneur, the collector, the dreaming collective, and (possibly above all) the dialectical image. These ideas and concepts have already attracted much attention, though often on the basis of their appearance in certain of his more tradition-

ally formed and polished texts. (Many of these pertinent texts were based on material in his *Arcades* folios, but as contributions to this volume will occasionally note, not without some loss of nuance and comprehensiveness.)

Several of these Benjaminian concepts and general notions point toward a type or state of being not usually transmitted by concepts and generalizations. We might call them intermediary states. There is a crucial example in Convolute K. With references to Proust and Freud, Benjamin characterizes the Parisian arcades as the product of a dreaming collective in the course of shaping and misshaping its memories.³ In that case, one might expect Benjamin to carry through the figure of the dreaming collective by opposing it to the proper historical consciousness of a wakeful, reasoning collective. This is not quite what happens. In one of the most noted figures of *The Arcades Project*, he instead emphasizes the process that occurs *between* sleepful dreaming and wakeful consciousness—the process of awakening. It is this intermediary state that is associated with the kind of historical knowledge he envisions: “[T]he moment of awakening would be identical with the ‘now of recognizability,’ in which things put on their true—surrealist—face” (N3a,3). Thus, “Awakening is . . . the dialectical, Copernican turn of remembrance” (K1,3). It is therefore “the Copernican revolution in historical perception,” in which “what has been” is no longer the fixed center (K1, 2). Furthermore, the struggle to engage in the intermediary state of awakening is not only that of the nineteenth century. Benjamin describes *The Arcades Project* itself as “an experiment in the technique of awakening” (K1,1). What I call Benjamin’s concern with intermediary states is therefore fundamental to his conceptualization of history. But *The Arcades Project* is pervaded by them, not only with respect to temporality and history but also with respect to spatiality and sociology, as in the ambiguities and reversals of the bourgeois division between inside and outside discussed in some of the essays included here.

To be moderately clever, one might even suggest that the very object with which we are concerned is itself in an intermediary state, a state of unfinishedness. This returns us to the problem of form. One straightforward response is to treat the text simply as an extraordinarily interesting set of research notes. On the other hand, it may still be premature to treat the form in which we now read *The Arcades Project* as a contingent rather than necessary aspect of it. If Benjamin was working toward a radically different

3. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), K1,1 through K1,5. Hereafter, references to this text are cited parenthetically by convolute number.

sense of the politics and language of historicity, the form of the text may well be a component of that enterprise. Perhaps this latter position need not even judge whether he succeeded, but it certainly requires active reading and some speculation to flesh it out and develop the possibilities that lie in this text for us. In fact, any position on or account of this text will be on a terrain of significant discussion and debate. The least that can be said of the contributions to this volume is that this is their terrain.

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How to understand *The Arcades Project* now? The essays included here are rich and varied. Some approach the text from a fairly expansive angle, giving us an overall purchase on it, while others begin from particular moments, figures, concepts, or convolutes. Some complement one another, some diverge from one another. Explicitly or implicitly, they all address Benjamin's sense of historicity, knowledge, and the textual. Taken together, they make for a complex tissue of ideas, arguments, and positions about *The Arcades Project* and Benjamin's work. This kind of collection might be ordered in a number of ways. Given the many possibilities, we have chosen a simple and neutral strategy. We begin with articles that propose different kinds of overviews of the project and then move toward those that begin from more focused attention to specific concepts or passages and then branch out.

We start with Samuel Weber's careful reading of Benjamin's approach to Paris as a structure of places. Weber emphasizes the categorically disturbing nature of intermediary, transitional states in *The Arcades Project*. Crucial to his exposition is Benjamin's explication of the German word *Schwelle*. As a spatial designation, it is more than threshold, border, or definitive limit of a place. It is a zone of transition, change, movement, where the edges of a place are inflated, such that inside and outside spaces overlap and the division between them breaks down. Much as the figure of awakening designates the *time* of a structuring indeterminacy that blurs the boundaries between sleeping and waking along with the putatively distinctive modes of thought and memory associated with them, *Schwelle* is the *space* of an analogous mediatory indeterminacy. Weber draws attention to the spatialization of such intermediate states in Benjamin's Paris in order to bind space to linguistic or signifying structures. This enables him to argue that Benjamin's account of Paris comprehends the city as text, in the sense of Jacques Derrida's generalized textuality. That is, the city is ultimately con-

stituted in the unending network of differential significations, readings and rereadings, interpretations and reinterpretations that underlie all signification. *Schwelle* thus implicitly becomes analogous to *différance*. Weber gives us something like a poststructuralist *Arcades Project*, whose allegorical consciousness stems from a profound awareness of the constitutive force of textuality. And the moment of dialectical image, which crystallizes a sudden *historical* rather than spatial revelation, is therefore the moment of a certain kind of readability for a mode of signification.

If Weber gives us a powerful entry to *The Arcades Project* focused on spatial indeterminacy and generalized textuality, T. J. Clark addresses the historicity of its raw materials in relation to the history of the bourgeoisie. For Clark, Benjamin's earlier work on *The Arcades Project* led him toward a fuller engagement with Marx in its later stages, an engagement never completed. Clark therefore divides *The Arcades Project* into two phases. The key object of the first half is indeed the Parisian *passages* and buildings. These are implicated in the intoxicating, phantasmagoric conflation of spaces—inside and outside, private and public—that is a kind of collective architectural dream experience historically specific in its overriding social and class confusions and obfuscations. The key object of the second half of *The Arcades Project*, on the other hand, is Baudelaire. The huge mass of materials in the Baudelaire folio marks a conceptual and theoretical turning point toward the category of the commodity and commodification, although the new materials and theory are less finished than those of the first half. Benjamin comes to the idea that Baudelaire's poetry and its allegorical character were invested not just by modernity but by the processes of commodity exchange whose universality Marx had identified as a structuring dominant of modern capitalist society. Its formal tendency toward incorporation of fragments and fragmentation of the surface of social life, along with its substantive awareness of commodification, identifies this poetry with *The Arcades Project* itself. Clark is skeptical of the desire to draw finished concepts and theories from *The Arcades Project* and doubtful of Benjamin's mastery of Marx. But he nevertheless finds central to the later sections of *The Arcades Project* a strong sense of the unavoidable force of abstract labor power, exchange, and commodity fetishism in art, as well as a consciousness of the suffering and class conflict that undergirds the bourgeois pleasures and intoxications that seem to seduce Benjamin in the earlier parts of the text.

It would be a mistake, I think, to too quickly invent a debate between a poststructuralist *Arcades Project* and a politicized or Marxist *Arcades Proj-*

ect. But in their convergences and divergences the contributions of Weber and Clark suggest an initial range of approaches to the work, from language, textuality, and interpretation to the social and political theory of capitalist modernity. These converge on the problem of how the text grasps the space and time of history. Howard Eiland provides a complementary angle of entry by focusing squarely on the formal uniqueness of *The Arcades Project*. While acknowledging both the importance of levels of language and interpretation and of Benjamin's interest in Marxism, his contribution to discussion of these is staged at the level of what might be called aesthetic form.

Howard Eiland proposes to consider *The Arcades Project* in relation to Benjamin's noted discussions elsewhere of distracted reception and the modernist aesthetic devices with which it is associated. He shows that, especially when thinking of Bertolt Brecht, Benjamin conceived of distraction as a symptom generated by commodification, which Eiland does not separate but aligns with the intoxicating alienation of phantasmagoria. Yet in other writings (centrally in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"), Benjamin conceived of distraction as an epistemologically radical experience of modernity, a new mode of perception attached to the disunified surface of things (a surface reminiscent of *The Arcades Project* itself). But in both cases, whether promoting the Brechtian resistance to distraction and intoxication or modernist participation in them, Benjamin privileged montage as aesthetic device. Therefore, Eiland argues that the devices of montage and superimposition, unthinkable without the modern technical media of photography and cinema, are central models not only for the form taken by *The Arcades Project* but for the dialectical image. Montage and superimposition are modes possible in modern technical media for representing intermediary spatial and temporal junctures and confluences; and the dialectical image is precisely the spatialization of a temporal interpenetration, the interpenetration of past and present.

Peter Fenves also inquires into the mode of representation to which *The Arcades Project* aspires, and he also relates it to another fundamental Benjamin text, but in this case it is *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. For instead of modernist aesthetic technology and form, Fenves's focus is on language and the philosophy of style. He turns to the concept of the monad, which *The Arcades Project* ties to its ambitions for a dialectical historicity. Fenves notes the long genealogy of the paradoxical ambition for a nontechnical, nonphilosophical philosophical language, which Benjamin joins. From this genealogy, Fenves emphasizes Leibniz, who conceives of words that are inseparable from their origins, and which therefore cannot

be troped or semantically transformed—that is, they name in such a way as to contain within them the infinity of all their possible uses and meanings. Leibniz developed the concept of the monad in connection with his study of *Kabbalah* and its search for the mystically perfect word. But Fenves finds versions of this philosophical impulse in twentieth-century philosophy, preeminently Edmund Husserl's phenomenological reduction. The younger Benjamin had already joined this tradition in the preface to his dissertation, when he invokes Adamic name giving, and also in his concept of a primordial history, but unlike Leibniz or Husserl, he was always concerned to align the monad or the reduction with historical knowledge. In *The Arcades*, the monad becomes a word that fixes the flux of time in order to grasp the overlap between past and present that constitutes the dialectical image (Eiland's superimposition). The monad can do this because it has an eternal or timeless character; containing all its possible meanings, it need not change. Benjamin's "dialectics at a standstill," now-time, and awakening are therefore all dependent on monadology. But according to Fenves, just as the quest for a perfectly natural, nontechnical language and a history based on it contradictorily generates technical terms (*monad, dialectical image*), only a nonsubject, a no-one, can actually say a monad. According to Fenves, Benjamin's term for this no-one is not the proletariat but the collective, which, along with the monad, becomes a kind of central vanishing point of *The Arcades Project*.

Like Eiland and Fenves, Michael Jennings also invokes another text of Benjamin's to illuminate *The Arcades Project*, but it is one based on materials from the latter, namely his unfinished draft of a book on Baudelaire from the 1930s. Jennings finds that this more conventionally written draft is a corrective to the usual understandings of Benjamin's account of modern experience, which have actually depended on a very truncated published extract from it ("On Some Motifs in Baudelaire"). According to Jennings, Benjamin does not give Kantian priority to an innate subjective structure. On the contrary, experience is first determined by the qualities and potential of its object. In *The Arcades Project* and the Baudelaire draft, Benjamin identifies a dominant form of the object that structures experience in nineteenth-century sociality: the commodity. Like Clark, Jennings locates a shift in Benjamin's thinking and associates it with work on Baudelaire, although his view of the shift seems different. (According to Jennings, under pressure from Max Horkheimer and Adorno in the late 1930s, Benjamin displaced the commodity with phantasmagoria.) But the crucial point is his epistemological emphasis on the material, objective surface of things. This has profound

consequences for the approach to modernity and its history embedded in *The Arcades Project*, especially its theory of temporality and experience. For if the commodity form structures objects of experience, then the temporality of experience is generated by it. The central arena of the temporality of the commodity form is fashion, the commodified process of novelty and sameness/repetition. In Benjamin's account, Baudelaire's modernity lay in adopting allegorical form in order to display commodification and its temporality in his poetry even as it worked within them. But this also makes it a poetry that points back to the condition of its own production. It may thereby contribute to an awakening.

It is appropriate to follow Jennings with the next two contributions, for they focus on types of objects crucial to Benjamin's account of nineteenth-century Paris, and they also are concerned with the dialectic wherein an object generated in and for capitalist mechanisms and structures may possess critical potentiality. The object addressed by Tom Gunning is the bourgeois *intérieur*. For Gunning, Benjamin's bourgeois *intérieur* designates a topography that crystallizes in the collective dream of a perfectly secure, privatized space apart from that of the street, the masses, and production. But once again, the intermediary state governs. The repressed incessantly return by means of an "ambiguous spatial interpenetration," the threshold leakage between inside and outside. (Compare Weber's analysis of *Schwelle*.) This interpenetration is found throughout Benjamin's Paris, from the plush parlors of the bourgeoisie to the arcades themselves. In dialogue with Benjamin, Gunning analyzes one privileged aspect of this overlap—optical devices. Certain optical devices were constructed to implement or guarantee spatial separation, but the gaze they presuppose traverses and confuses the boundaries of inside and outside. Referring to the detective story, Gunning shows how such optical devices figure or articulate the dialectic of inside and outside, and therefore, we might say, concretize the intermediary states so crucial to *The Arcades Project*. With comparisons to Michel Foucault and an elaboration of Freud's uncanny, Gunning argues that this visual dialectic is not only one of mastery and anxiety but also one that includes a potential underside of threatening, revolutionary perceptions that can transform and politicize the figure of monadic truth. Gunning's cultural analysis provides an interesting complement to Fenves's philosophical account. Since it includes the whole, the monad—which Leibniz and Benjamin figure as a windowless space, an *intérieur*—may explosively include what is outside it. The classed dream of spatial separation is therefore not only linked to the visual regressions of phantasmagoria and the

ideological inversion of Marx's camera obscura, but is simultaneously the basis for a radical temporality, an awakening that is the standpoint claimed by *The Arcades Project*.

The privileged object of experience addressed by Peter Wollen is clothing as mediated by the concept of fashion, which Jennings identifies as Benjamin's key commodity. Also in dialogue with Benjamin and *The Arcades Project*, Wollen traces out his own historical sketch of the rise of haute couture and ready-to-wear clothing. By highlighting the utopian fantasies inherent in fashion, he implicitly extends utopian potential to the commodity itself and therefore the bourgeois dreamworld. The fashion object is defined by the processes and abstractions of commodity, but it is also concrete and sensuous. It is this sensuousness that mediates the relation of systemic, abstract exchangeability to the individual. Furthermore, the commodified temporality of fashion, with its combination of modern novelty and sameness/repetition, bears directly on the theory of the dialectical image. Its intermediary state of awakening implies the possibility that repressed desires and thoughts associated with sleep and dreaming can be released. Like Gunning, Wollen finds that the possibility of redemptiveness exists in and through objects, including objects which are most complicit with the forces that make redemption desirable. This complements the critical potential of Benjamin's commodity-immersed Baudelaire discussed by Clark and Jennings.

The final two contributions experiment with approaching *The Arcades Project* through a different type of entry. They invoke a body of textuality not explicitly central or directly connected to *The Arcades Project*, but of which Benjamin was probably aware. Instead of claiming a direct linkage with *The Arcades Project*, however, they engage in comparative investigations that treat those other bodies of textuality as in some way paralleling, mirroring, and/or illuminating important concerns of *The Arcades Project*.

The body of textuality to which Claudia Brodsky Lacour compares *The Arcades Project* is Hölderlin's "late" poetry. She is less interested in establishing a genealogical link, even to Benjamin's own writings on Hölderlin, than in exploring a certain kind of parallelism of two unique lines that never meet but are dialectically and mutually illuminating. In particular, she points to a concern with the interrelation of history and architectural form that Hölderlin shares with Benjamin. What Hölderlin calls his "poetic view of history" may be set against Benjamin's theory of the dialectical image. According to Lacour, both the poetic view of history and the dialectical image operate paratactically, between myth and its absence, between the non-

human and the human. With her close attention to nonhuman architecture in the poetry of Hölderlin, Lacour implicitly points out a connection between *The Arcades Project* and Romantic image theory, while providing a distinctive perspective on the problem of the “standstill” in Benjamin’s conception of historical temporality.

Henry Sussman invokes Benjamin’s connection to Judaism. Unlike Fenves, he is not interested in the Kabbalistic condensation of meanings but, on the contrary, in the tradition of Talmudic commentary that leads to a vast textual or linguistic expansion, which he calls “fractal.” Beginning from Benjamin’s two Exposés of *The Arcades Project*, which he treats as a kind of literary montage, Sussman proceeds through an account of the spaces in Benjamin’s Paris as compartmentalized horizontal zones, in order to arrive at a concept of textual compartments or registers. These are the formal arenas for semiotic and semantic expansion as against the drive to limit and bind textuality. Sussman’s primary example is a legal argument about binding responsibilities from the Talmud, but he seems to see such expansionism as a fundamental constituent of all textuality. He identifies a widespread impulse in the history of textuality that more explicitly sets expansionism into play by means of formal, typographical, and graphic devices (his examples include illuminated Arabic script and Islamic art, Joyce, Buddhist stupas, and Derrida’s *Glas*). This is the tendency within which he positions both the form and method of *The Arcades Project*.

In his afterword, Kevin McLaughlin also invokes German Romanticism, though from a different angle than Lacour. He carefully glosses the young Benjamin’s derivation of a philosophical notion of “criticizability,” which is connected to discussions of incompleteness and the potentiality of a great work. McLaughlin argues for a connection between this idea and the cultural criticism of *The Arcades Project*, finding that it underlies such Benjaminian concepts as the distracted public and the collective. Most appropriately, he concludes by applying it to our own discussions of Benjamin, here and now, which all attempt to address the actuality and the potentiality of *The Arcades Project*.

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“Streets, Squares, Theaters”: A City on the Move— Walter Benjamin’s Paris

Samuel Weber

It is anything but self-evident that the writings of Walter Benjamin, and most recently the accumulation of notes and excerpts devoted to the Parisian passages, should continue to enjoy such wide popularity. For Benjamin’s criticism, as distinct from much cultural criticism today, never forgets that whatever the subject matter may be, its distinctive specificity always entails a certain structure of language, and hence, of its interpretation. Never does Benjamin appeal to a “materiality” of objects that would not simultaneously involve a signifying structure. And nowhere is that more evident than in his approach to the city, and, in particular, to the Paris through which his passages pass, or—if I can coin a phrase—*impasse*. This city, perhaps more than any other, emerges in Benjamin’s writing as itself a *text*. To be sure, to understand the kind of textuality that constitutes Paris for Benjamin, it is imperative that the notion of “text” be taken in the larger sense assigned to it some thirty-five years ago by Jacques Derrida, who, in his programmatic essay *Of Grammatology*, argued for a notion of a “generalized text,” to be distinguished from the more familiar notion of book, or from the more restricted phenomenon of words actually written or printed on a page.

This notion of a “generalized text”—one which would accommodate a “city” no less than an exclusively verbal structure—has had a somewhat checkered history, for understandable reasons. For it has seemed to many, and not just at first sight, that this attempt to “generalize” the notion of text had something imperialistic about it, extending the realm of script, and with it the rule of scribes, to all aspects of human existence, and perhaps of existence in general.¹ But this suspicion was based on a misreading so evident that it had to be driven by a desire to retain precisely what the notion of “generalized textuality” was designed to challenge: the priority of a certain notion of self-presence, identity, and meaning with respect to their mode of articulation. The misreading to which I refer quite simply ignored the fact that what allows the notion of textuality to be “generalized” in the way indicated by Derrida—and before him, by Benjamin—was not its discursivity, nor its substance, but rather its *mode of signifying*.² Building on Ferdinand de Saussure’s notion of signification as a process distinct from and structurally prior to representation, a process constituted by differential relations rather than by the representation of a self-identical referent, Derrida’s notion of a general and generative textuality argued that any process of articulation, whether discursive, using words and language, or nondiscursive, using images, sounds, or any other “sense impressions,” operates in the manner of a text, insofar as meaning determines itself through the differential relations in which it is engaged. What distinguished Derrida’s approach from that of more orthodox structuralists, such as Saussure—and what until today makes the term *poststructuralist* a usable and viable designation—is the way it construes the operation of these differential relations. Unlike Saussure, *différance* for Derrida was invariably caught in a double bind: that of “binding” itself. Which is to say, the differential process entailed the deferring of a meaning that therefore could never be self-contained or com-

1. Symptomatic of this reaction, from someone who should have known better, is Foucault’s diatribe, in his introduction to the second edition of the book, *Madness and Society (L’histoire de la folie)*, in which he inveighed against this tendency as the effort of a “mean-spirited pedagogy” [*petite pédagogie*] to restrict intellectual investigation to the analysis of written texts.

2. It is well known that Benjamin’s original plan was to write his *Habilitation* on the scholastic treatise, *de modi significandi* (attributed at the time to Duns Scotus, and in the meanwhile reattributed to Thomas of Erfurt). He abandoned it when he discovered it had already been made the object of a *Habilitationsschrift* by one Martin Heidegger. Far from abandoning his concern with the modes of signifying—a term he uses in his essay on the “Task of the Translator”—Benjamin developed it in his theory of allegory, which he placed at the center of *The Origins of the German Mourning Play*, his unsuccessful attempt to “habilitate” himself.

plete. Any semantic determination inevitably depended upon what it could never fully assimilate or integrate. The illustrative example I like to use is that of looking up a word in the dictionary: Each new reference opens up new possibilities, *ad infinitum*. The existence of conventions generally serves to absolve us from what would otherwise be a *regressus ad infinitum*. But only at a cost, for the implications and connotations always exceed whatever definition or determination we decide, or convention decides, to make.

The notion of a generalized—or, better, *generative*—textuality, then, never implied the servile recourse to an authoritative and irresponsible “pedagogy” but rather the acknowledgment of an inevitable involvement in a network of responses, interpretation, reading, and definition that can never legitimate itself *in its own terms*. Such involvement is therefore inevitably *exposed* to a future that will never be entirely predictable or fathomable.

It is the burden and challenge of such *exposure* that mark the writings of Walter Benjamin, and perhaps none more than those gathered in, and as, the *Passages*. What they expose is nothing more or less than the *allegorical cast* of apparently material reality. Such allegorical exposure takes responsibility for the unknowable that sits at the heart of all efforts to decipher and decode, interpret and communicate. To take responsibility, in other words, for something that cannot be controlled, but that nevertheless calls insistently for a response.

This is perhaps the secret fascination of Benjamin’s writings: In exposing the allegorical cast of their subjects, they *call for a response* that goes beyond the conventional notion of reading as the rendering of meaning. Benjamin never forgot that reading, far from being simply the reassuring recognition of the familiar, involved the taking of risks and the exposure to danger. Nowhere was he more concerned with this than in his *Passages*, as the following passage, from Notebook N, suggests:

What distinguishes images from the “essences” of Phenomenology, is their historical index. . . . The historical index of images indicates not merely that they belong to a particular time, it indicates that only in a particular time do they come to be readable [*zur Lesbarkeit kommen*]. And this coming to be readable defines a critical point in their innermost movement. Every present is determined through those images that are synchronic with it: every now is the now of a determinate knowability.³ In it truth is charged with time to the breaking

3. Although the published English translation of this text uses *recognizability* to translate *Erkennbarkeit*, I am reluctant to abandon the reference to “knowledge” or “cognition” as such, especially in view of the fact that this connotation is easily lost in the English

point. (This breaking, nothing else, is the death of intention, which thus coincides with the birth of genuine historical time, the time of truth.) It is not so much that what has gone by [*das Vergangene*] casts its light upon the present, or that the present casts its light upon what is gone; rather, the image is the constellation that ensues when what has been [*das Gewesene*] converges with the Now in a flash. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, that of what has been to Now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but rather imagistic. Only dialectical images are genuinely historical, i.e. not archaic images. The image that has been read [*das gelesene Bild*], which is to say, the image in the now of Knowability, bears to the highest degree the stamp of the critical, dangerous moment that underlies all reading.⁴

The “historical image” that Benjamin describes here is not something that can simply be seen but something that must be *read*. Its “readability,” or legibility—its *Lesbarkeit*—is what results from the highly conflictual kind of relations that produce it. This is why Benjamin takes pains to emphasize that the historicity of an image results not simply from its belonging to a particular epoch but rather from what he designates as its “synchronic” relation to it. Such synchronicity is constituted as much by separation as by convergence. It is precisely this simultaneity, involving both proximity and distance, that is the condition of any possible “knowledge” of images, their “knowability.” Such “knowability” is situated not in the interval between two fixed points, for instance between the past shedding light on the present, or the present shedding light on the past, but rather in a different sort of space: that of a convergence which does not result in simple identity. What it produces is articulated through two very different and yet complementary figures in Benjamin’s writing: the *Blitz*, the lightning flash, and the *constellation*, the more or less stable agglomeration of stars.

recognize. *Recognize* tends in English to take *cognize* for granted, whereas Benjamin is here insisting, I believe, on the fact that cognition itself is involved. It should be noted that although *erkennen* can be used in German to mean *recognize*, there is a specific German word for *recognize*, *wiedererkennen*, and Benjamin does not use it. But I readily acknowledge that *both* translations seem to be possible, and each has its advantages and disadvantages.

4. Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982), 5:577–78 (N3,1). Hereafter, this work is cited as *PW* followed by convolute number. All translations are my own.

One might be tempted here to try and relativize the tension of these two figures so dear to Benjamin by ascribing the "flash" to the manner in which "what has been," in coming together with the "Now," acquires a certain stability as the "constellation." And that would not be entirely wrong. The point, however, is that this constellation in and of itself remains marked by the abrupt and instantaneous process out of which it emerges. It is defined by the *potentiality of Zerspringen*, of breaking apart, which Benjamin describes as the "genuinely historical time, the time of truth." Truth, then, with Benjamin as with Heidegger, entails not the correspondence of an intention with an intended object: It is not the fulfillment, and hence, confirmation, of a temporal movement, tending toward a goal, but rather "the death of intention" which is simultaneously the "birth" of another kind of time, not that of the subject, but of "history" and of "truth."

Only in this sense can the dialectical image be said to be both "knowable" and "legible." "Knowable" because "legible." But "knowledge" here is as unstable as is truth, and "reading" is the articulation of the two. Articulation, here as elsewhere, designates not simply identity or synthesis but a disjunctive bringing together and keeping apart, for instance, of the most extreme movement—that of the lightning bolt (*blitzhaft*)—and the most extreme stasis—that of the constellation.

This indicates just why Benjamin should have been interested in questions that seem as much spatial as temporal, and above all in their disjunctive convergence, as, for instance, in "Paris" designated as "Capital of the Nineteenth Century." For such "localizations" interrupt and suspend the goal-governed, teleological temporality of conscious "intentionality," in which all movement is construed from the perspective of an ultimately static, detached, and unquestioned fix-point, one that reflects, more or less unconsciously and uncritically, the point of view of the observer. It is this notion of "time" that is "exploded" by the spatiality of a text that must be read, that is "readable" (*lesbar*), but that can never be wrapped up in a definitive or conclusive meaning. This is why Benjamin designates the "critical" moment that underlies all reading as being a "dangerous" one. For it inevitably poses a threat to its own identity by acknowledging its involvement in a movement whose end can be neither fully foreseen nor entirely controlled. The *danger* that underlies this critical kind of reading would thus be of the same sort as the danger that underlies human life itself, and this might ultimately explain much of the resistance to reading and to its correlatives, textuality and writing. In this case, however, the "generality" of the text and of reading would be tied not to the universality of the concept, or of "theory," but to the critical

moment of *singularity* that marks the *disjunctive convergence* of the two: of the general and the particular, the theoretical and the practical.

This is why the kind of textually oriented reading called for here by Benjamin, or practiced by Derrida, distinguishes itself both from traditional theoretical and from traditional critical discourse precisely in the way it responds to this singularity. Its involvement in texts—which are always singular structures, even when they are nondiscursive, as here, where they concern “readable images”—does not lead to general conclusions that can be extrapolated from their singular occurrences and made into the elements of a universally valid system of knowledge, or even of a methodology. Benjamin has no methodology, no more than does Derrida. His writings, however, can be read as tracing lines of force that lead in certain directions. In what follows, I want to explore a few of these directions.

I will begin with a passage that is inscribed in Notebook P of the Paris Project, to which the editor of the German edition assigned the title “The Streets of Paris.” However, as we shall see, what Benjamin is concerned with here is not simply “the streets” of Paris but rather their relation to their “names.” Here, as always, language for Benjamin marks a certain movement of convergence, of simultaneity, transforming what otherwise might be taken as being *self-contained* into a dynamic and elusive relationship to be read, which is to say, into a text:

Paris has been spoken of as the *ville qui remue*, the city that is always on the move [*die sich dauernd bewegt*]. But no less significant than the life of this city’s layout [*Stadtplans*] is here the unconquerable power in the names of streets, squares, or theaters, a power that endures [*dauer(t)*] notwithstanding all topographical displacement. How often were those individual little stages, which, in the days of Louis-Philippe still lined the Boulevard du Temple, torn down, only *to see* them resurface newly constituted in some other *quartier* (I refuse to speak of “city districts” [*Stadtteile*]); how many street names, even today, preserve the name of a landed proprietor who, centuries earlier, had his property on their ground? The name, “Château d’Eau,” referring to a long-vanished fountain, still haunts various *arrondissements* today. In their own way even the famous restaurants [*Lokale*]—to say nothing of the great literary cafés—secured their small-scale communal immortality, as with the Rocher de Cancale, the Véfour, the Trois Frères Provençaux. For hardly has a name imposed itself in the field of gastronomy, hardly does a Vatel or Riche become famous, than all of Paris, out to the suburbs, is teeming with

Petits Vatel and Petits Riches: such is the movement of the streets, the movement of names, which often enough run at cross purposes to one another. (*PW*, P1,1)⁵

"Streets, Squares, Theaters"—the triad that I have chosen for the title of this essay—leaves out a fourth element that stands apart from the other three but that is inseparable from them: the "names" assigned to each of these urban sites. And yet each relates to its name differently. Before we begin exploring some of those differences, we should first recall that Benjamin is speaking not just of the city in general, or even of the European city during a particular period, but of one very singular city and a very precise time: Paris during the nineteenth century. Paris during this period was, for Benjamin, distinguished by a characteristic that he described, typically enough, by using a spatial category that turns out to be surprisingly difficult to render into English. In German, Benjamin calls it a "*Schwelle*," usually translated as "threshold." But this translation does not begin to do justice to what Benjamin means by the term. He explains this significance by precisely demarcating the word from what "threshold" would generally be taken to imply and then elucidating its meaning by referring to the verb, *schwellen*, cognate with the English *swell*: "The *Schwelle* must be radically distinguished from the limit or border [*Grenze*]. *Schwelle* is a zone. Change [*Wandel*], passage, flooding lie in the word 'swelling' [*schwellen*]" (*PW*, 618).⁶

Benjamin's insistence upon distinguishing "threshold" from "limit" or "border," from *Grenze*, is significant of the manner in which he rethinks the notion of place more generally. No longer defined, as has been the tendency ever since Aristotle, primarily through its function of delimitation or containment, in what was an essentially linear manner, place, as *Schwelle*, entails the breakdown of the clear-cut opposition between inside and outside. Swelling indicates a crisis in the function of containment. The container

5. Translation modified. Benjamin's French is erroneous here in two places: "Cancale" and "provençaux."

6. The association made here by Benjamin has no basis in etymology, even though he suggests that it does: "These meanings must not be overlooked by etymology" (*PW*, 618). According to Duden's etymological dictionary (*Herkunftwörterbuch*), *Schwelle* is etymologically associated with the English, *sill*, whereas *schwellen* is derived from roots cognate with the English, *swell*. My thanks to Michael Jennings, Kevin McLaughlin, and countless others for calling this to my attention. On the significance of the *Schwelle* for Benjamin's work in general, see Wilfried Menninghaus, *Schwellenkunde: Walter Benjamins Passage des Mythos* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986).

no longer serves as a fixed place to define movement as change of place but instead is itself caught up in a movement, a tension, becomes over-extended. Such a “swelling” is thus always both more and less than what it appears, a distended *res intensa*. In this respect it is profoundly related to the notion of “allegory” initially elaborated by Benjamin with respect to German seventeenth-century theater but to which he returns in his analyses of the nineteenth century as well, albeit in a different, more interiorized form. It is this kind of distended, inflated place that will render the topography of nineteenth-century Paris legible as a text, albeit as an allegorical one.

Allegories have a particular relationship to names, and to naming. If an allegory always entails the potential of meaning something other than what it seems, at first sight, to represent, then it is clear that whatever name it bears will be subject to a similar instability. This is not, however, what the passage quoted above seems to say. Indeed, it not only *seems* to say but actually *does* say that the dynamics of change and movement so widely associated with Paris, as the city said to be constantly in motion—*la ville qui remue*—appears to be held in check by “the irresistible force in the names of streets, squares, or theaters,” names which, all topographical displacements notwithstanding, seem to “last.” But as we will see, they last or endure in very different ways. For the three urban sites cited here by Benjamin as instances of the “topographical displacement,” of a city “on the move,” are quite distinct from one another. Streets and squares are structural designations of urban localities, but what about “theaters”? Their relation to the city seems quite different. A theater is, first of all, an edifice, a building of sorts, not an organization of urban space in the sense of “streets and places.” Yet Benjamin appears to place the three in a series, implying some sort of commensurability between them. Although he will not comment directly on this commensurability, in the sentence that follows Benjamin goes on to develop the theatrical aspect of the city by referring to “those small stages” [*jene(r) kleinen Bühnen*] located on the Boulevard du Temple, which, despite being torn up again and again during the reign of Louis-Philippe, reappeared regularly elsewhere in the city, with or without the same names (for Benjamin does not give details).

Without discussing explicitly the notion of theater or theatricality here, with respect to the city, Benjamin’s example strongly suggests that the power of the city to resist the passage of time and space relates as much to theatricality as to language. And this power in turn is related to the particular ability of the stage to survive its own demise, as it were. For a stage is a place that can be destroyed, displaced, dislocated, but it still can reappear

elsewhere with what is apparently an irrepressible force. What is constant, then, in the constant transformation of the city, is neither the physical existence of individual locations nor even the ideal existence of their names but rather the recurrence of theatrical stages in different places. The stage, unlike the traditional, Aristotelian notion of place, is movable, returning as both different and the same. The survival power of such "stages" thus both runs parallel to and diverges from the ostensible longevity of place-names. For when we look more closely—that is, when we reread—the way Benjamin describes the function of those names, we discover a far less unified and coherent account than one might have expected: "How many street names, even today, preserve the name of a landed proprietor who, centuries earlier, had his property on their ground? The name, 'Château d'Eau,' referring to a long-vanished fountain, still haunts various arrondissements today." The first instance seems clear enough and conforms to our expectations: The name of the owner of a certain property is preserved in the name of the street that is located on that property. Human finitude finds a certain survival in the persistence of the name. But the very next example diverges radically from this familiar scheme. To be sure, the name is no longer that of a person, a landowner, for instance, but a thing, an artifact: *Château d'Eau*, which formerly referred to a singular, "long-vanished fountain," returns in the place-name, but as a ghost, to "haunt" not simply the place of its origin but places in which that particular tower may never have existed. In this case, then, the survival of the name does not preserve the memory of its bearer but rather underscores the ever present possibility of an uncanny proliferation, which Benjamin goes on to develop in his third and concluding example of the power of Parisian place-names:

In their own way even the famous restaurants [*Lokale*—to say nothing of the great literary cafés—secured their small-scale communal immortality [*ihre kleine kommunale Unsterblichkeit*], as with the Rocher de Cancall, the Véfour, the Trois Frères Provençaux. For hardly has a name imposed itself in the field of gastronomy, hardly does a Vatel or Riche become famous, than all of Paris, out to the suburbs, is teeming with Petits Vatel and Petits Riches: such is the movement of the streets, the movement of names, which often enough run at cross-purposes to one another. (*PW*, P1,1)

It should be noted that in German the generic term for *bars*, *bistros*, and *restaurants* is *Lokal*. For what Benjamin describes in this passage is precisely the fate of the *local*, of *localization* in the "topographical dislocation"

that marks Paris as a city on the move, but moving in the sense of “swelling” already discussed. How do “localities,” *Lokale*, survive this land-swell? They secure a “small-scale communal immortality” precisely through the reiteration of great and famous names that thereby return as diminutives. But the abrupt shift in this third and final example, from ordinary proper names to *famous* place-names introduces an element that sheds light on the role of the theatrical in Benjamin’s discussion of the city. A certain *fame* is perpetuated and associated with more or less proper names, with making a name. Such famous names are then transported and reproduced in other areas, for instance, as “Petit Vatel,” thereby acquiring a certain “communal immortality.” But the claim to such immortality presupposes precisely the dimension that defines theatricality: the *interplay* with spectators, listeners, audience. The “little stages” are not just constructed places but *places that play to a crowd*, to others who are their addressees and witnesses at once. The space of the theater, of the stage, of the theatrical scene, is defined not just by its physical perimeter but rather by the far less definable, heterogeneous others to which it appeals and which, through their responsiveness, retroactively make places into theatrical stages. What Benjamin seems to suggest, in this paragraph, is that the characteristic urban locality is theatrical in this precise sense of being other-directed, or, if you will, heterogeneous. It is therefore a *Schwelle*, not in the sense of a transition or interval, situated between two fixed points or places, but as a zone of indefinite expansion and inflation, reaching out to others upon whose response it depends. This zone is theatrical in being internally split, divided into spectacle and spectators, stage and audience, inseparable and yet distinct. Such an audience marks the intrusion of the outside into the ostensibly self-contained interior of the place, “swelling” it, as it were, inflating it, making it larger than life, and yet also dislocating it in principle by rendering it dependent on a perimeter that is essentially displaceable, involving not just other places but also other times. For a theater is always also a place of memory and of anticipation, where what *has been* is repeated and changed into what is *to come*.

We have had a slight glimpse, perhaps, of how a theater and a stage might function in this urban configuration. But what about streets and places? In another passage from the same notebook, Benjamin indicates what a “street” means for him:

“Street,” to be understood, must be contrasted to the older notion of “way.” Both are, in their mythological nature, entirely different from one another. The way connotes the terrors of going astray [*des Irrgangs*]. The leaders of wandering peoples must have benefited

from their afterglow. In the incalculable turns and decisive dividing of ways, the solitary wanderer even today can feel the power of ancient indications [*Weisungen*]. By contrast, whoever walks on a street apparently does not need any such indicators or a leading hand. He succumbs to its power not in going astray but in the monotonous fascination of the unfurling band of asphalt. The synthesis of these two terrors, however, going astray in monotony, is to be found in the labyrinth [*stellt das Labyrinth dar*]. (*PW*, 647)

The labyrinth is a figure to which Benjamin returns frequently in his description of the city in general, and of nineteenth-century Paris in particular. It shows that the relatively simple opposition between "street" and "way" is not sufficient to characterize urban space. To be sure, the unpredictable meanderings of the "way" require guides in a manner that the urban streets apparently do not. But the city is not just a conglomeration of streets and an absence of ways. Rather, the unpredictability and sudden surprises of the traditionally rural way change shape and character in the city: They become less linear and more repetitive—one can go astray not simply by losing one's way, but by the reiterative "monotony" of streets that seem to duplicate one another but yet as repetitions are still different from each other. In their very recurrence they create a trancelike monotony that finds its visible epitome in the hypnotic unfurling of the "asphalt band." The reiteration of this unfurling in its monotony is what Benjamin calls the experience of the "labyrinth." Like those names and stages that return, but with a difference, losing their ostensible propriety and coming to designate something other than their original "owners" and locations, the paths that come together in the interlocking network of the labyrinth entice one to move ever further into the maze without disclosing the way out. The result is a certain *amazement*, not just "in" the city—which, we have begun to see, has no stable interior—but, rather, far beneath its imperial surface, in what in Paris is called, appropriately enough, the *Métro*: "But names only reveal their true power when they surface [*auftauchen*] in the labyrinthine halls of the *Métro*. Troglodytic imperial lands—thus emerge Solférino, Italie and Rome, Concorde and Nation. Hard to believe, that all of these run together up above, converging under the bright (blue) sky [*unterm hellem Himmel*]" (*PW*, P2,3). Names of self-glorifying, victorious historical battles, of ancient cities and deities, all "surface" far under the earth of the imperial capital, where they acquire an archaic resonance as the names of subway stations. The old, rural way returns in nineteenth-century Paris in subterranean form, as its subways. Its name is that of the generic city itself. In this labyrinthine city

under the city, Benjamin's version of the Platonic Cave, the cave-dwelling subway riders can hardly fathom that these archaic names "come together" up above to form a coherent system of the capital, urban, and historico-political at once. And for Benjamin, at least, the amazement of these sub-urban cave dwellers is not merely an indication of how deluded they are. Perhaps their subterranean amazement is closer to the kind of experience that alone, for Benjamin, can disclose the most profound reality of the city. It is the experience of that "zone" he calls the *Schwelle*, and it is an experience that is becoming increasingly rare: "We are very poor in threshold experiences. Falling asleep is perhaps the only one that is left for us. (But this would also include awakening.)" (*PW*, O2a,1). Awakening is an experience of the *Schwelle* insofar as it is inseparable from falling asleep—and vice versa. It is not a linear transition *from* one state to another, from a state of sleep *to* a state of wakefulness, but rather an *experience* that *traverses* a zone no longer bounded by the familiar oppositions of sleep and wakefulness, which are no longer mutually exclusive but rather overlap.

It is this experience of the *Schwelle* as overlapping and as superimposition that characterizes the final scene I want to discuss: the square, or place. Benjamin's description of it seems to contradict everything we have said up to now about the function of names and language in the city:

And then those timeless tiny squares, which are there before you know it and on which names do not stick, which have not been planned long in advance like the Place Vendôme or the Place des Grèves, placed under the protection of world history, but which are houses that slowly, half asleep [*unausgeschlafen*], and belatedly assemble before the wake-up call (the reveille) of the century. In such squares it is the trees that have the word, even the smallest give thick shade. Later, however, their leaves stand like dark-green milky glass before the gas lanterns and their earliest green glowing at night gives spring an automatic signal to enter the city. (*PW*, P1,2)

Benjamin's description here recalls Marvell's "green thought in a grade shade," which William Empson analyzes as the highest, most complex form of the *Seven Types of Ambiguity* that, he argues, distinguish the language of poetry from the logic of communicative speech.⁷ Such ambiguity is all the more striking here insofar as these little places or squares entertain a rather tenuous relation to discursive language. Unlike the great and celebrated

7. William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (New York: Norton, 1966).

plazas and places, these little squares have no permanent names; they seem so small, so erratic, that names will not "stick" to them but rather only houses and trees. Nevertheless, however material they may seem, these houses and trees are anything but nonlinguistic, even if the language they speak is very different from what we are most familiar with. In his rendition of these little squares, the houses that inhabit them present themselves belatedly, still half asleep, before what Benjamin calls the reveille of the century, a ragtag and motley army, sharply distinct from the great historical monuments that stand smartly under the patronage of world history. These little houses play a role that is somewhere between that of an unheroic protagonist and that of a simple, inanimate stage property.⁸ They are decor and actor at once. And yet it is not they who have the last word. Rather, the action of the play—and by now the reader will have noticed that this description of the little square is in fact an elaborate and complex scenario—is tied to the least active, least human, least dynamic, in the traditional sense at least, element of the scene: to those trees, of which "even the smallest give thick shade."

With this mention of the trees, something very strange happens to this scene. As Benjamin might have said in his book on German baroque theater, time wanders onto the stage.⁹ But it is a strange, ambiguous time, marked by adverbs and adjectives such as *later* and *earliest*: "Later, however, their leaves stand like dark-green milky glass before the gas lanterns and their earliest green glowing at night gives spring an automatic signal to enter the city" (*PW*, P1,2). "Later"—presumably after the reveille of the little houses before the call of the century—the waking light of day is mitigated by "the dark-green milky glass" shed by the shade of even the "smallest" trees. Is the tiny square a place of awakening, or of falling asleep, or of the superimposition of the one on the other, its divergence and convergence at once? At any rate, it is a place where nature and technics come together in the "earliest green glowing" of the leaves lit up at night, not by the moon but by "gas lanterns." And their reply is to give a "signal" that is no less paradoxically technical: in German, *ein automatisches Einfahrtssignal*, one of those

8. It should be remembered that in Benjamin's account of the allegorical theater of the German *Trauerspiel*, things and stage properties are no less important than human characters. See Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (New York: Verso, 1998), 133.

9. What he in fact writes is, "History wanders onto the stage" (Benjamin, *Origin*, 92). The English translation obscures the movement of "wandering": "Die Geschichte wandert in den Schauplatz hinein" becomes "History merges into the setting."

words that resemble the verbal monstrosities periodically used to caricature German to non-German speakers. Yet it is precisely this convergence of nature and technics, light and dark, in the color of a shadow and a glow, that marks the irreducibly relational language of the tiny square, with its little houses and smaller trees.

The signal that they give opens the gates of Paris to the advent of spring. But at the same time, it also gives the allegorical reader the green light to read the city as a text composed not just of words and of images, of sounds and of shocks, but also of silent lanterns and shadows glowing green in the dark.

Should Benjamin Have Read Marx?

T. J. Clark

First, apologies for my title. I realize it puts the question I have in mind somewhat glibly, not to say flippantly, as if scared to death of seeming too reverential in the face of the Benjamin phenomenon. I apologize, then, for the form of the question but not for the question itself—and not for posing it baldly. Doing so is meant as antidote to what seems to me to have been happening in the generality of Benjamin studies over the last decade or so—where I take the question very often to be put implicitly, and, as it were, with regret, and the answer given by the implicitness.

“Was it a good thing for Benjamin as a writer”—here is the question spelled out—“that he came to identify himself with the project called Marxism, and seems to have entertained the idea of turning his book on nineteenth-century Paris into a study, specifically, of culture shaped by commodity production, the latter elaborated in terms picked up from *Capital* and *The Critique of Political Economy*?” Posing the question implicitly, as, by and large, recent writing on Benjamin has done, seems to me a way of avoiding having to say something as vulgar and ahistorical as that it was a *bad* thing. Only very distinguished South African novelists are allowed to

produce that opinion out loud, with a positive cold war twang. But I take the drift of serious current scholarship to be reaching much the same conclusion sotto voce. Benjamin's Marxism was a period phenomenon, it tells us: a serious phenomenon, to an extent, and certainly not simply to be condescended to, but never a set of commitments and dreamed-of procedures that Benjamin properly reconciled with his deeper, and more original, religious and critical positions, and on the whole getting in the way of Benjamin's true upward trajectory as a thinker. In particular—and here is my topic—Marxism got in the way of the wonderful poetic-ethnological simplicity of *The Arcades Project* as first conceived in the later 1920s. It muddied, multiplied, and mechanized the project's original outlines; so that finally, essentially, Marxism can only be seen as a cancer on Benjamin's work—on what should have become the last and greatest of surrealist grapplings with the nineteenth century, a settling of accounts with all the mad dreams of Grandpa and Grandville and Victor Hugo. But is it necessary for us to say this? Doing so will only give pain. Does not true originality regularly come with its measure of dross? Is not talking at length about Benjamin's Marxism the equivalent of harping on Newton's obsession with alchemy or James Merrill's nights at the Ouija board?

Obviously I do not think so. But I almost think so; I understand the recent scholars' squeamishness, and I think much of the case they make (or intimate) is reasonable and well meaning. I want to suggest in what follows why I think in the end it will not do. This will necessitate my discussing *The Arcades Project* very broadly and synoptically—stating the obvious at some moments, and at others hacking my way crudely through what I know to be difficult thickets of interpretation. I have to do this, because my subject is the overall plan and direction of Benjamin's later work, and what the engagement with Marxism meant for it. I need to totalize, and to think about the nature of Benjamin's changing totalizations. And therefore I need—very much in the spirit of Benjamin's own view of history and philology—to present a Benjamin who is deeply, constitutively, out of date. A dusty, unfashionable, left-wing Benjamin, discovered in the backroom of a 1960s antique store. In the Passage Debord or Galerie Wiesengrund. Much like the Benjamin I remember coming across—with what mixture of excitement and disbelief one can imagine—in the British Museum reading room in 1965, in the pages of a small militant periodical called *Studies on the Left*. (Ah, nostalgia, nostalgia—that most realistic of interpretative tropes.)

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Let me start from the question, then, of what guiding ideas seem to have got Benjamin started with *The Arcades Project* in the late 1920s, and of how near or far from the world of Marxism those first ideas may have been.¹ I am thinking in particular of Benjamin's sense of what *The Arcades Project* was for—what the point of historical reconstruction was, in his view, and specifically the reconstruction of something as negligible as these odd, down-at-heel, petit bourgeois remnants (Figures 1 and 2). Partly, the answer to this—the general, overall answer, I mean—is familiar. Bourgeois society, Benjamin thought, was slowly, over the generations, waking up—waking to the reality of its own productive powers, and maybe, if helped along by its wild child, the proletariat, to the use of those powers to foster a new collective life. And always, however stertorous and philistine the previous century's slumber may have been, it was dreaming most deeply of that future life and throwing up premonitions and travesties of it. Once upon a time, what we call “education” consisted essentially of interpreting shared dreams of this sort—telling the children about tradition, or the deeds of fools and heroes, or the coming of the Messiah, or simply having them learn and recite the tales of the tribe. In the bright classroom of the twentieth century, this could not happen, and so the peculiar discipline named “history” has had to take over the task. It will tell us what the bourgeoisie once dreamed of, and interpret the dreams—poetically, tendentiously—in the hope that when we dead awaken, we shall know what to do with the tools (the “information”) our slaves have forged for us.

I take it most commentators on Benjamin agree that some such view of the task of history is what brought *The Arcades Project* into being. Where agreement breaks down is over how to interpret Benjamin's choice of the spaces I illustrate (the Passage des Panoramas, photographed, I would guess, at much the same time Benjamin started writing about it; and the Passage Choiseul, shot, by the look of the costumes, maybe a decade or so earlier) as his central objects of study. Many ingenious pages have been written on the subject, but it still seems to me to slip through readers' fingers. It is Benjamin's great riddle, built into the structure of his book. Here is my answer to it, which can only be tentative.

Of course Benjamin was aware that the passages made sense only if they were seen as belonging to a whole family of nineteenth-century inven-

1. This essay borrows elements from my “Reservations of the Marvelous,” *London Review of Books*, 22 June 2000, 3–9.



Figure 1. Unknown photographer. "Le Passage des Panoramas."



Figure 2. Unknown photographer. “Le Passage Choiseul.”

tions, many incomparably more strange and beautiful than they. The epoch had been rich, almost prodigal, in its production of “dream houses of the collective.” At one point in *Convolute L*, Benjamin draws up a list of “winter gardens, panoramas, factories, wax museums, casinos, railway stations,”² and one could easily add to this from other sections of the compendium: the Crystal Palace (ground zero of the bourgeois imagination), the Eiffel Tower, Labrouste’s exquisite reading rooms, maybe Guimard’s Metro entrances, certainly the lost *Galerie des Machines*. But the arcades are the key to this wider history for him, because only in them were the true silliness and sublimity of the new (old) society expressed to the full.

2. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. and trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), L1,3. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *AP* and by convolute.

The arcades were utter failures and abiding triumphs. They were old-fashioned almost as soon as they declared themselves the latest thing. As early as the 1830s, commentators could be found declaring them hopelessly passé. Their use of iron and glass was premature, naïve, a mixture of the pompous and fantastic. They were stuffy and dingy and monotonous; dead dioramas; phantasmagoria of the dull, the flat, and the cluttered; *perspectives étouffées* (a subject-heading from early in the convolutes, which seems to me to sum up much of Benjamin's thinking).

The word *phantasmagoria* in this connection is perhaps best understood technically: The arcades were perspectives where near and far, and large and small, could be endlessly subject to tricks of the light. But the tricks were lugubrious and always easily seen through: This, too, was part of the places' appeal. "The light that fell from above, through the panes . . . was dirty and sad" (*AP*, F1,2). "Only here," said de Chirico, "is it possible to paint. The streets have such gradations of gray" (*AP*, D1a,7). Arcades were unfailingly "close" (to recall a word that seemed to dominate my childhood)—there was sure to be thunder by the end of the afternoon. Drizzle was their natural element. They did not keep out the rain so much as allow the spleenic consumer to wallow in rain publicly, his breath condensing drearily on the one-way glass. "Nothing is more characteristic than that precisely this most intimate and most mysterious affair, the working of the weather on humans, should have become the theme of their emptiest chatter. Nothing bores the ordinary man more than the cosmos" (*AP*, D1,3). Rain guaranteed boredom, thank God, since it meant that one could not "go out." The arcades allowed a whole century to be housebound and at loose ends in the company of strangers. They were eternal waiting rooms, caves containing fossils of the first consumers, mirror worlds in which gadgets exchanged winks, mephitic front parlors on endless Sunday afternoons with dust motes circulating in the half-light. Odilon Redon was their painter—his very name sounded like a ringlet on a cheap wig in the back of the shop. They were waxworks of the New—Arcs de Triomphe (commemorating victories in the class struggle).

And for all these reasons they were wonderful. They were a dream and a travesty of dreaming—in the golden age of capital, all worthwhile utopias were both at the same time. Or perhaps we could say that they were pieces of nonsense architecture, in which the city negated and celebrated its new potential, rather in the way that those other distinctive nineteenth-century creations, nonsense verse and nonsense novels (*Alice* or Edward Lear or *Un Autre Monde*) negated and exalted mind, logic, innocence,

and imagination. What the arcades released above all as a possibility—a botched and absurd possibility, but for all that intoxicating—was the idea of a city turned inside out by the operation of the market. “The domestic interior moves outside”—this is Convolute L—but, even more, the street, the exterior, becomes where we live most fully, which is to say most vacantly, lingering all day on a permanent, generalized threshold between public and private spheres, “neither on the inside nor truly in the open” (*AP*, C3,4), in a space belonging to everyone and no one. We linger, we drift, we finger the goods. “Something sacral, a vestige of the nave, still attaches to this row of commodities” (*AP*, F4,5). “Existence in these spaces flows . . . without accent, like the events in dreams. Flânerie is the rhythm of this slumber” (*AP*, D2a,1). The proper inhabitant of the arcade is the stroller. For only the stroller is wordless and thoughtless enough to become the means by which the passages dream their dream—of intimacy, equality, homelessness, return to a deep prehistory. “For the flaneur, every street is precipitous. It leads downward . . .—into a past that can be all the more spellbinding because it is not private, not his own” (*AP*, M1,2).

What I have done in the previous paragraphs, you will realize, is sew together clues, images and half-embedded arguments that are scattered through many different convolutes in *The Arcades Project* itself. I know the procedure is risky. Making a set of connected propositions out of Benjamin’s card catalog inevitably takes liberties with what Benjamin had to say, or how he thought he had to say it. But then, we do not know how he would have chosen to say it in the end. And I am confident my sketch is true to the bare logic of his imagery in the key dossiers, which is strong and consistent—and urgent, for all the writer’s *Through the Looking-Glass* tricks.

The passages sum up the golden age of bourgeois society as Benjamin conceived it because they were a vision of the city as one great threshold—between public and private, outside and inside, past and present, stultifying dreariness (the reign of the commodity) and final Dionysian rout (Paris as fun house, Paris as Commune, Paris as diorama burning down). Already in the early twentieth century this vision had become old-fashioned. “We have grown very poor in threshold experiences,” says Convolute O. The arcades were, once again, irremediably in decline—victims of the cult of fresh air and exercise, streets with a care for pedestrians (it was only when Tarmac replaced cobblestones that loungers in cafés could hear themselves speak), electric light, and vice squads with a sense of mission as opposed to a taste for the on-the-spot deal. Dickens, we could say, was giving way to Kafka. I do not have to tell you how much Benjamin hated this turn of

events. Bourgeois society would only become bearable, he believed, if it had the courage to be stuffy, overcrowded, bored, and erotic again—to sleep, to dream, to see its own tawdriness and absurdity, and therefore to wake to its infinite power.

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So much for the Passage des Panoramas. I expect that any reader of the convolutes will find points to make against the emphases and links in my montage, and that some will feel that I have left crucial questions and images to one side. But I have the feeling, or hope, that the arguments will not immediately spin out of control—there will be a measure of agreement among us about where the arcades fit in Benjamin's vision of bourgeois society, and even where exploring them might have led. The same cannot be said of the other main topic of the book, Charles Baudelaire; and even less so of the way the ever expanding and metastasizing study of Baudelaire began to intersect, in the 1930s, with new dossiers and kinds of reading on Benjamin's part—with Marx, and the fetishism of commodities, and socialism and class. Reading the whole last half of *The Arcades Project*, which is clearly less exhilarating than the first, involves constantly wondering where the new material (and the new theory) is going and whether Benjamin himself really knew. The famous prospectus of 1935 is beautiful, plausible; but going back to the dossiers that ought by rights to put flesh on the bones of the new argument, the feeling grows (for this reader) that whole sections of the prospectus were more window dressing than promissory note.

This is depressing, and complicated. Textual problems occur, which I am not competent to deal with. Maybe, in any case, the best way to approach the "fate of *The Arcades*" issue is simply to take Convolute J, the one on Baudelaire, for what it is, and ask why it got so large—why it took over.

The center of gravity at the very beginning of the Baudelaire note cards, as you would expect if some of them date from Benjamin's first campaign in the late 1920s, is the poet as a character, an actual inhabitant of the dream world of arcade and interior. "His voice is . . . muffled like the nighttime rumble of carriages filtering into bedrooms upholstered with plush" (AP, J13,7): One can imagine Benjamin's excitement at coming across this in Maurice Barrès. There are good moments, but essentially the convolutes are on a false trail. They are fitting the poet too literally into a frame. It takes many, many folios before the collage of quotations begins to secrete a genuine sequence of thought. At last, after almost a hundred pages of the

present edition, you can see it dawning on Benjamin that his subject ought to be “Baudelaire” as a production in Baudelaire’s poetry—that is, a peculiar kind of hero with no interior life. Paul Claudel once argued that Baudelaire’s true subject was remorse, that being “the only inner experience left to people of the nineteenth century.” This was not just too Catholic a verdict for Benjamin, it was too optimistic. “Remorse in Baudelaire is merely a souvenir, like repentance, virtue, hope, and even anguish, which . . . relinquished its place to *morne incuriosité*” (AP, J53,1).

This is the reason why the organizing mode of Baudelaire’s verse is allegory—because only allegory can enact the final disappearance of “experience” in the Second Empire and its replacement by glum indifference, stupefied brooding, fixation on the endless outsides of things. “The allegorical experience was primary for [Baudelaire]” (AP, J53a,1). His actual, everyday apprehension of his surroundings was as a flow of enigmatic fragments. Quite abruptly, as I noted before, the quotations in the convolute become less random and respectful, and start to take on a horrifying momentum—hit after hit of petrification, freezing laughter, useless galvanized gaping. “Baroque allegory sees the corpse only from the outside; Baudelaire evokes it from within” (AP, J56,2).

This train of imagery—and here I return to my main topic—begins at last to interact with what Benjamin was reading at the same time in Marx and Karl Korsch. So the Baudelaire question rapidly transmutes into the following (the great question of *The Arcades Project* in its second phase): How could it possibly have happened that something as null and repulsive as the life of the commodity in the nineteenth century—the life it provided consumers, but above all *its* life, its incessant, flesh-crawling vivacity—gave birth to poetry? To a poetry we cannot stop reading, and which seems to speak to generation after generation about the real meaning of the New? How did the commodity take on form and attain a measure of (cackling, pseudo-Satanic) aesthetic dignity? (A comparable question for us would be asked of the “digital,” or the image of information. But they await their poets.)

The answer to the question, roughly, is that it did so in Baudelaire by means of the retreat (or ascension) to allegory I have been pointing to. Allegory is the commodity’s death’s head. “The allegories stand for that which the commodity makes of the experiences people have in this century” (AP, J55,13).

Around the middle of the century, the conditions of artistic production underwent a change. The change consisted in the fact that for

the first time the form of the commodity imposed itself decisively on the work of art, and the form of the masses on its public. Particularly vulnerable to these developments . . . was the lyric. It is the unique distinction of *Les Fleurs du mal* that Baudelaire responded to precisely these altered conditions with a book of poems. It is the best example of heroic conduct to be found in his life. (AP, J60,6)

But this on its own will not quite do as diagnosis. As in the case of the arcades and collective dreaming, it is important that Baudelaire botches and travesties the great work he takes on. His version of allegory is in many ways ludicrous—deliberately strained, tendentious, and “shocking.” More like pastiche than the real thing. (But is there a real thing to allegory? Do not all “allegories become dated because it is part of their nature to shock”?) In any case, an allegory of capitalism is obliged to take the very form of the market—novelty, stereotype, flash self-advertisement, cheap repeatable motif—deep into its bones. “Baudelaire wanted to create a *poncif*, a cliché. Lemaître assures him that he has succeeded” (AP, J59a,1).

So that finally, after what seems like a long wandering away from the world of the arcades, we begin to see that Baudelaire, at the level of syntax, diction, and mode, belongs precisely there—breathing the gassy air, looking sullenly through the clouded glass. “It is the same with the human material on the inside of the arcades as with the materials of their construction. The pimps are the iron uprights of this street, and its glass breakables are the whores” (AP, F3,2). “No one ever felt less at home in Paris than Baudelaire. *Every* intimacy with things is alien to the allegorical intention” (AP, J59a,4). The arcades are the epitome and generalization of homelessness—the dream of a society with no room of one’s own to go back to.

Does it need saying that in contemplating Baudelaire Benjamin is contemplating—allegorizing, idealizing—himself? At times the reflections on Baudelaire’s loneliness and impotence hardly pretend to be verdicts on somebody else. And more and more, as the notion emerges of a poetry made out of stupefied fragments, frozen constellations, advertisements, trademarks, and death rattles—a poetry of capital that could truly take on the commodity’s chattering liveliness and lifelessness—it is the convolutes themselves one sees, dancing attendance on *Le Spleen de Paris*.

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I mentioned earlier that during the 1930s *Les Fleurs du mal* kept company with *Capital* in Benjamin’s reading, and that recent scholarship has

tended to treat this fact somewhat gingerly, with what looks like embarrassment or distaste. Rolf Tiedemann's essay "Dialectics at a Standstill," where the trace of both affects is unmistakable, is brilliant, and helpful; but I do not see why it has so decisively set the tone for the study of *The Arcades Project* since 1982. And I bridle at its presence, yet again, as the sole piece of criticism included in the English translation. This makes it difficult to keep a sense of proportion in replying. No doubt the de-Marxification of Benjamin is annoying. But it would be playing into the hygienists' hands simply to reverse their emphases and exclusions, and replace one cardboard cutout with another. A "Red Benjamin" to fight it out with "Benjamin, Prophet of the Holocaust" or "Benjamin, the Father of Cultural Studies"? God forbid. I believe the fairest verdict on Marxism as a mode of thought in the Paris book is that it is pervasive, vital, and superficial.

The fact that the convolutes become, in the mid-1930s, less and less sketches for essays that seem already to exist in embryo in Benjamin's mind, and more and more raw theoretical and empirical material for a whole whose outlines are only dimly felt, means that we sometimes get a glimpse of the actual mechanics of Benjamin's new engagement in ways he might not have wanted. More than once in the notes from this time one comes across him copying out a hoary passage from Marxist scripture—the "theological niceties" paragraph, the sentences from the 1844 manuscripts on the "sense of having"—and then a few pages (months, years?) later copying it out again, like a slow learner kept after school. Both times the passages are taken from introductions or anthologies. Things get more serious later, but even in the beginning the Shakespeare's Holinshed rule applies. Benjamin learned more about the logic of capitalism from a skim of Hugo Fischer and Otto Rühle than most of us ever shall from months in the Marx-Engels archive. And given the surrounding circumstances of Marxism in the 1930s, there is a way the very flimsiness of Benjamin's materialism was an asset. It meant that he never seems to have felt the appeal of high Stalinism, nor even of that of its Dance-of-Death partner, the Frankfurt School. "Marxist method" never got under his skin. Not for him a lifetime spent like Adorno's, building ever more elaborate conceptual trenches to outflank the Third International. One has the impression that Benjamin hardly knew where the enemy, within dialectical materialism, had dug itself in. He is Fabrice del Dongo at Marxism's Waterloo.

But none of this means that Benjamin's Marxism, such as it was, did not feed and enliven the project he had in hand. His reading grew deeper as the decade wore on. *Capital* was dreamed over, clearly for weeks on end.

Many of the quotes taken from the 1844 manuscripts (again, copied from a book of extracts published in Leipzig in 1932) are far from standard—admittedly, it is hard to be dull when choosing aphorisms from this source—and the brief headings he gives his fragments speak already to his sense of how Marx might work for him. “On the doctrine of revolutions as innervations of the collective,” reads one (*AP*, X1a,2). (Miriam Hansen has taught us how central and productive the concept of innervation became for Benjamin’s work in the period of the “artwork” essay,³ so it is salutary to see that it had its roots in the Young-Hegelian Marx as much as in Freud.) “A derivation of class hatred that draws on Hegel,” reads another (*AP*, X1a,5). The way is beginning to open, I think, toward the searing first pages of the Baudelaire book. “When we read Baudelaire we are given a course of historical lessons by bourgeois society. . . . From the outset it seems more promising to investigate his machinations where he undoubtedly is at home—in the enemy camp [that is, the bourgeoisie]. . . . Baudelaire was a secret agent—an agent of the secret discontent of his class with its own rule.”⁴

“The way is beginning to open”—I claim no more than that. And readers are fully entitled to wonder if even the Baudelaire book delivered, or could have delivered, on the promise in the sentences quoted. Working out how Marxism came to function in Benjamin’s imagination, then, and how it might have figured in *The Arcades Project’s* final form, will involve an extraordinary interpretative balancing act. Best-case reconstruction will have to go hand in hand with a refusal to let the accidental present state of Benjamin’s remains be fetishized as his “method”—the book-made-out-of-nothing-but-citations, the de-totalized totality, montage, *Trauerspiel*, the dialectical image. I shall do no more here than point to one or two ways in which Marx’s thought begins really to be a generative force in Benjamin’s inquiry rather than a set of surface tropes or citations. This is, to repeat, only part of the story. Nothing is going to cancel the impression of muddle and turgidity that shadows many of the later dossiers. Work is in progress. The challenge to criticism is to decide whether there are signs of the work’s giving rise to a new constellation.

The first sign is obvious. Only the most dogged de-Marxifier will fail to see, at the end of the 1930s, a real convergence between Marx’s understanding of capitalism’s key representational logic—the logic of com-

3. See Miriam Hansen, “Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (winter 1999): 313–23.

4. Walter Benjamin, “Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1973), 104.

modity exchange—and Benjamin’s sense not just of what Baudelaire was doing (which is more and more the book’s main conundrum), but the flâneur, the automaton, the photographer, the prostitute, the *feuilletoniste*. “Abstract labor power” becomes Benjamin’s subject. Forced equivalence of the unequal. He sees the nineteenth century more and more as a society with abstraction as its doppelgänger, haunting and deranging its great panoply of inventions. “Whereby the sensuous-concrete counts only as a phenomenal form of the abstract-general” (*AP*, X4a,1): This Young-Hegelian turn from chapter 1 of *Capital* is what *The Arcades Project* will show actually happening.

“Show actually happening” is the issue. For of course Benjamin is deeply dissatisfied with the un-sensuousness of most Marxist demonstrations of the same truth. “Must the Marxist understanding of history”—this is the famous question from Convolute N—“necessarily be acquired at the expense of history’s perceptibility? . . . In what way is it possible to conjoin a heightened vividness [*Anschaulichkeit*] to the realization of Marxist method?” (*AP*, N2,6). Or again: “Marx lays bare the causal connection between economy and culture. For us, what matters is the thread of expression. It is not the economic origins of culture that will be presented, but the expression of the economy in its culture. At issue, in other words, is the attempt to grasp an economic process as perceptible *Ur*-phenomenon, from out of which proceed all manifestations of life” (*AP*, N1a,6).

One way of saying this (which we have heard repeatedly since Benjamin’s death) is that we need, as counterweight to the theory of the commodity as a form of alienated social relations, a parallel one of its evocation of endless desire. A theory of consumption, that is, as well as exchange. But late Benjamin cannot really be enlisted to support this comforting either-or, or one plus the other. His thinking in the 1930s is headed not toward clean alternative theories of capitalism’s power but toward a theory of the nesting of consumption *in* exchange (that is, in the cruelty and force of relations of production). Near the beginning of the dossier on Marx, he jots down the following verdict: “It would be an error to deduce the psychology of the bourgeoisie from the attitude of the consumer. . . . It is only the class of snobs that adopts the consumer’s standpoint. [For “snobs” nowadays we could substitute “symbol managers” and a certain type of postmodern intellectual.]”

5. Compare “Baudelaire had the good fortune to be the contemporary of a bourgeoisie that could not yet employ, as accomplice of its domination, such an asocial type as he represented. The incorporation of a nihilism into its hegemonic apparatus was reserved for the bourgeoisie of the twentieth century” (*AP*, J91,5).

The foundations for a psychology of the bourgeois class are much sooner to be found in the following sentence from Marx, which makes it possible, in particular, to describe the influence which this class exerts, as model and as customer, on art" (*AP*, X2,2). I shall not quote the heavy sentence itself, which is from *Capital*, chapter 11, "The Rate and Mass of Surplus Value." But, believe me, it has to do with capitalism not just as a whirl of exchange value but as a system of appropriation and control of the labor of the proletariat.

This coming to consciousness of capital as always a form of specific domination over labor is, in my view, fundamental to Benjamin—it is the great problem he struggles with in the last three years of his life. For of course it puts his initial, wonderful idea of the "dreaming collective" at risk. Which collective? is now the question. Whose collective? At the expense of who else's dream of community? It is not that Benjamin was ever in two minds about the arcades being a fantasy of togetherness strictly on the bourgeoisie's terms. But it was hard (the way through Convolute U, V, and W is laborious, and in a sense deeply obtuse) for him truly to *use* his knowledge that the dream houses were redoubts, armed camps with guns pointing in the direction of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. Only slowly do contrary dreamings appear. Only slowly (against massive resistance) does he come to see his own 1928 dreaming in the Passage des Panoramas as not just class-specific but actively *on the side* of the commodity. You will have noticed, and I hope shuddered at, the casual inclusion of "factories" in his initial list of Wonderlands. The verdict on Baudelaire as secret agent in the enemy camp (as with so many of Benjamin's verdicts on his hero) is a verdict, hard won, on himself.

This does not lead the secret agent to the hair shirt and act of self-denunciation (that is, it does not turn Benjamin into a Stalinist) but, rather, I think, to a sketch of a truly *dark* history of the working class—a history without consolation. The clues to this are preliminary, but for me they make up one of *The Arcades Project's* most terrible legacies. "It may be considered one of the methodological objectives of this work," Benjamin writes in Convolute N, "to show what a historical materialism would be like which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress. Just here, historical materialism has every reason to distinguish itself from bourgeois habits of mind" (*AP*, N2,2). Nothing could demonstrate the hold of those habits better than the way the history of the urban proletariat has usually been written—under the sign of redemption, with the Party or the revolution or the "socialization of the means of production" as always the Messiah who will give suffering a meaning, a destiny. It is one sign of how far Benjamin came in the end

from his theological origins that, in the appalling montage of working-class poverty, exploitation, nihilism, and suicide he puts together in *Convolute A*, truly no redeemer liveth. At one moment in 1939, he extracted from the convolute an image of sharpshooters all over Paris in 1830, on day two of an uprising already running into the sand, aiming their guns at the clocks on the towers. In the context he found for it in 1939, the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” the story takes on a certain chiliastic glamour. I prefer the tonality given it by the place it had originally, almost at the end of this relentless dossier—we might call the whole forty or so pages *Les Misérables* (in preference to Tiedemann’s somewhat po-faced *Social Movement*). There the bullets slamming into the clock face are a form of dreaming, for sure, but a dream that Benjamin has speak to us from the last circle of hell.

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The Arcades Project is not a book to be read deferentially, and I hope my praise of it has none of the “sad hero of the age of Fascism” flavor that makes so much of the Benjamin literature unbearable. The book is cranky, preposterous, disorganized. It leaves one dissatisfied, as surely the building blocks of a Marxist history of capitalism’s inner life should. Finally, then, let me turn briefly to some of the things I feel it leaves out or gets wrong.

First, the matter of dreaming and waking. One aim of *The Arcades Project*, at least in its later stages, was to plot the relation between the true (unconscious) collective dreaming of the nineteenth century, encoded in the constellation of forms, materials, novelties, commodities, advertisements, and literary detritus that Benjamin made his own, and the conscious utopias of Saint-Simon and Fourier. (Marx believed himself to have surpassed such utopia building, but did he? That is another of *The Arcades Project’s* questions.) I do not believe this cluster of issues ever comes into focus. Saint-Simonianism, which is the epitome of a kind of technocratic dreaming of the future familiar to us digital scribes, slips dully through Benjamin’s fingers. Yet the point at which socialism and machinolatry intersect is vital to an understanding of the last two hundred years. Benjamin never, in my view, gets on terms with Saint-Simon, and even his treatment of Fourier is ultimately too picturesque, too much an item in a cabinet of socialist curiosities. Nor do I think his note cards do much to clarify the relation of these forms of dreaming to the one going on in the Passage Choiseul. And does not the failure of Benjamin to do so—or really to show us even a glimpse of how such a clarification might be managed, within his structure—point to the limits of his

notion of history? For the nineteenth-century “collective” dreamed many of its futures while it was wide awake. It dreamed different futures, according to its changing sense of which collective (within the dream totality of collectives) counted. And it acted on its dreams; it acted them out.

Benjamin would reply, if I understand him, that these waking acts of the imagination (these strange discourses, these rushes to the barricade) were too flimsy and technical to lead us to the heart of things. But were they? The Commune awaits a truly Benjaminian treatment. Fourier’s madness is deeper than we know. There is a cryptic entry in *Convolute W* where revolutions are described as “an innervation [we could almost say a jerking into life, a galvanizing] of the technical organs of the collective,” like “the child who learns to grasp by trying to get hold of the moon” (*AP*, W7,4). We have already glimpsed the idea cropping up in the dossier on Marx. Reference is made to the “cracking open of natural teleology” (*AP*, W8a,5). Both are described as “articles of my politics”—as if such a politics were being actively aired and developed elsewhere. Maybe the book itself would have faced these questions head on. Maybe they would have intertwined with the dark, inconsolable history of the proletariat I have said can be seen in the making. Dream versus revolution, then. Collective versus class. Utopia versus allegorical stifling and dispersal. One shivers at the presence of the ghost of a further, wider dialectic in the scattered notes. But making the ghost palpable would have meant throwing almost everything back in the melting pot.

Then, finally, we come to the question of Parisian art—and beyond it, Paris seeing. There is a lovely phrase for the arcades in one of Benjamin’s first sketches—“the city in a bottle”—which he drops when he moves the sketch into *Convolute Q*. The phrase was surely not lacking in poetry, but maybe the poetry was of the wrong kind. Benjamin wanted his arcade windows always to be dusty, not opening onto the outside world. Visual art for him equaled Grandville, Eiffel, Daguerre, and Nadar, the panorama painters, Daumier (but how quickly the Daumier dossier peters out!), Redon, the Metro entrances. Manet is mentioned only once in passing—notable in a book where Baudelaire is the main guide. Impressionism does not get a look in; Ingres (painter of the horror of bourgeois subjectivity) barely figures; Seurat not at all. Benjamin’s Paris is all interior, all gas lit or twilit. It has no true outside—no edges, no *plein air*, no Argenteuil or Robinson. No place, that is, where Nature itself is put through the sieve of exchange value and laid on in the form of day trips and *villégiatures*; and no answering dream of

pure visibility and outwardness, or the endless strangeness of earthbound life. No *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* or *Grande Jatte*.

"Whereby the sensuous-concrete counts only as a phenomenal form of the abstract-general." In my view, you either see that Manet was the visual artist who was able to show us the abstract-general and sensuous-concrete becoming moments of one another, or you don't. And if you don't, I am not convinced your version of Marxism will ever attain to the measure of vividness (*Anschaulichkeit*) it so much wishes for. Not if your chosen subject is Paris in the nineteenth century.

Paris for Benjamin is a city of signs, words, and gesticulations, not scenes and sights. He is a flaneur, not a tourist. Nowhere in the convolutes is there an entry from Murray or Baedeker. I do not believe Benjamin was deeply (meaning blankly) receptive to the look of things. He was at home in the Passage des Panoramas, with the indoor machinery of visualization working full tilt; one senses that if he had ever found himself on Manet's Butte de Chaillot, or at Caillebotte's great intersection of the rue de Saint Pétersbourg and rue de Turin, he would not have allowed himself the true frisson of loss of bearings and entry into the realm of the eye. Agoraphobia was not his thing. Somewhere he tells the story of Mallarmé every day crossing the Pont de l'Europe and being "gripped by the temptation to throw himself from the height of the bridge onto the rails, under the trains, so as finally to escape the mediocrity which imprisoned him" (*AP*, M15,2). But he does not build on the anecdote, and I feel he does not quite see its point. Benjamin's Paris is not frightening enough—not empty enough, disenchanting enough. I do not think the Paris book is sufficiently aware that its passages were pathetic enclaves of dreaming—reservations of the marvelous—in a great desert of the smart. Benjamin wanted the wonderful too much.

One way of putting this (it has the air of a formula, but it gets matters clear) is to say that Benjamin's Paris is all dream and no spectacle: The apparatus of spectacle is not understood by him to invade the dream life and hold even unconscious imagining in its grip. Not to put one's full stress on the city as more and more, even in the time of the arcades, a regime of false openness seems to me to miss something essential about bourgeois society—something dreadful and spellbinding. If you leave out Mallarmé swaying by the railings, you leave out part of modernity's pain. Equally, if you leave out the line of painting from Delacroix to Matisse (which Benjamin does, essentially), you leave out too much of what made the pain endurable—meaning bourgeois hedonism, bourgeois positivism and lucidity. This

is not a matter of pitting high art against photography and caricature, incidentally—of course we need histories of all three—but of asking what this particular high art has to tell us about the culture that spawned it.

These matters lead finally to Benjamin's deepest presuppositions as a historian. The presuppositions are written into his choice of objects. Roughly speaking, Benjamin seems to have believed that the true history of the recent past could be put together from its high and low literature, its phantasmagoria, and its kitsch. Painting is barely part of his archive, but neither are science and medicine and most other forms of bourgeois inquiry into the world, nor the whole panoply of philosophical and artistic positivism. There is no place for Littré in the arcades, or Pasteur, or Larousse, or Reclus, or Chevreul (he gets a passing mention as the object of Nadar's first photographic interview in 1886), or Monet, or Cézanne. Benjamin is interested always in the utopian moment to be found in the negative—in the dinginess and clutter of the arcades, in Grandville's whimsy, in Fashion swapping aphorisms with Death, in the cheap patter of the *feuilletoniste*, in Baudelaire's "Hélas! tout est abîmé." No one would deny that these are part of the story. All honor to Benjamin for bringing them to light. But perhaps we have come to a moment, oddly, when the other side of the nineteenth-century dialectic needs to be reasserted: not only the wishes and potentialities threaded improbably through the negative, but, even more, what the century's proudest forms (its actual achievements) of lucidity and positivity went on disclosing of terror—of true *abîme*—built into the bourgeoisie's dream of freedom. Mallarmé swaying by the railings, yes; but also Seurat looking through the bright screen of unique sensations to the standardization and atomization that the screen (the new screening and de-differentiating of everything) made possible. Hedonism and positivism—and the whole project of radical secularization that attended them—were just as integral to our grandfathers' dream-life as magic lanterns and *The Hunting of the Snark*. And just as frightening, just as absurd.

Benjamin famously believed that the modern was the time of hell. But it seems to me he never realized that what was most hellish about modernity was pleasure in its highest bourgeois form—the moment of sheer appropriation and instrumentality in the face of experience, of disabused belonging to the world and turning it immediately to one's purposes. It is hellish, and it is heavenly. Aby Warburg once, toward the end of his life, dictated some notes about Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, in which he described the painting, touchingly, as "the image of a liberated humanity that moves with assurance in the sunlight [*die Prägung freien Menschentums, das sich im*

*Lichte selbstlicher empfindet].*⁶ No doubt the verdict is naïve. But maybe, after Benjamin—after a half-century of the hermeneutics of suspicion—what needs to be recaptured *is* the sunlight, the full illusion of assurance and transparency. For this illusion was the nineteenth century's chief utopia. And out there, beyond the academy, it still holds the majority in its grip.

6. Aby Warburg, *Manet* (unpublished manuscript, 1927), A, 3, quoted in Ernst Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1970), 277.

Reception in Distraction

Howard Eiland

I take my title from a passage near the end of Benjamin's essay on the technological reproducibility of the work of art. Benjamin italicizes the sentence: "*Reception in distraction [Die Rezeption in der Zerstreung]—the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in apperception—finds in film its true training ground [Übungsinstrument].*"¹ I would like, in what follows, to highlight a certain inconsistency (if I can put it that way) in Benjamin's handling of the concept of distraction, a variance in his attitude toward the concept, and I would like to show how two separate attitudes involved here—one promi-

1. Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit," in vol. 1 of his *Gesammelte Schriften* (hereafter cited parenthetically as *GS*), ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), 505; "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," trans. Harry Zohn, in vol. 4 of Benjamin, *Selected Writings* (hereafter cited parenthetically as *SW*) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, forthcoming 2003). Reference is to the third version of the essay (composed 1936–1939). My attention was first drawn to the theme of distraction in Benjamin's work by Lindsay Waters's essay, "Walter Benjamin's Dangerous Idea" (manuscript, 58–61).

nently exemplified in his writings on Bertolt Brecht and the other in the work of art essay—are both reflected in *The Arcades Project*. I shall refer, provisionally, to the first of these attitudes as “negative,” and to the second as “positive,” but it should be kept in mind that, especially in the case of the artwork essay and *The Arcades*, the notion of distraction operates in a peculiarly slippery manner, such as very likely makes this one of the more elusive of Benjaminian topoi. It is at its slipperiest where it bears on the theory of montage.

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The “negative” view of distraction is enunciated in Benjamin’s discussion of Brecht’s epic theater in two pieces from the early thirties: the magazine article “Theater and Radio,” from 1932, and the famous (possibly undelivered) lecture from 1934, “The Author as Producer.” In both texts Benjamin distinguishes epic theater from the big-city “theater of convention,” which, in its complementary functions of cultivation and distraction, *Bildung* and *Zerstreuung* (the latter might also be translated here as “entertainment”), caters to a “sated class,” as he says, “for which everything it touches becomes a stimulant.”² In the epic theater, on the other hand, a certain concrete pedagogics takes the place of sensationalism, *Schulung* replaces *Bildung* (that is, “training”—the training of expert judgment—replaces “culture”), and instead of distraction there is “group formation” [*Gruppierung*], which refers to the formation of both a well-informed audience and a highly trained ensemble of performers on the basis of a set of shared social and political concerns translated on the stage to a series of radically distinct, thought-provoking “actions”—what Brecht calls the “knotting” of the incidents.³ *Zerstreuung* thus has the sense of “divertissement” here, of complacent diversion. Rather than such a bald appeal to the emotions—above all, to the capacity for empathy, for identifying with characters—epic theater engenders critical distance; rather than soothing or warming its audience, it seeks to astonish them through the well-known “alienation effect,”

2. Walter Benjamin, “Der Autor als Produzent,” in vol. 2 of his *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), 697; “The Author as Producer,” trans. Edmund Jephcott, in vol. 2 of Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 778.

3. Bertolt Brecht, *Schriften zum Theater*, ed. Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1957), 170; *Brecht on Theatre*, trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 203. Hereafter, these works are cited parenthetically as *ST* and *BT*, respectively.

which, by making ordinary objects and actions seem strange, renders them conspicuous and encourages audience and actor alike to reflect on them. Discovery through alienation—“communication by alienation” (*ST*, 169; *BT*, 202)—these are Brecht’s formulas for the new experimental theater that he and others (such as the directors V. E. Meyerhold and Erwin Piscator) have established, one where the development of plot gives way to the “lightning-like” (*GS*, 2:530) illumination of situations and where performance becomes critique. As Benjamin puts it in the first of two essays entitled “What Is Epic Theater?” (1931), “The discovery of situations is accomplished by means of the interruption of sequences” (*GS*, 2:522). Benjamin lays emphasis on the principle of interruption, which, with its “retarding character” (a term derived from Schlegel and Novalis),⁴ makes for the distinctively punctuated, intermittent rhythm of Brechtian drama. Whether by means of the sudden intervention of song, the use of captions, or what Brecht calls the gestic conventions of the actors, this interruption of sequences creates gaps that undermine the audience’s illusion of a “world” on the stage and make room for critical reflection, including the possibility of imagining, as Brecht says, “a different set of political and economic conditions” (*ST*, 242–43; *BT*, 86) under which the actions on stage might take place. In this way the stage is converted from a *Bannraum*, a magic space, a space for working spells, to an *Ausstellungsraum*, or exhibition space (*GS*, 2:520), and the merger of artistic and political projects is realized.

In “Theater and Radio” and “The Author as Producer,” Benjamin explicitly connects the Brechtian discovery of the “gestus”—the element of a gesture, action, or word that conveys a particular attitude on the part of a character toward other human beings—to the “restoration of the method of montage decisive in radio and film” (*GS*, 2:698; *SW*, 2:778). On the stage of the epic theater, declares Benjamin, this technological process—namely, montage—becomes a human one. The principle of interruption, which is as central to the method of montage as it is to the alienation effect, has here a pedagogic function and not just the character of a stimulus. It brings the action to a halt, occasioning surprise, and hence compels the spectator to adopt an attitude toward the situation in question, and the actor toward his or her role. In “What Is Epic Theater?” Benjamin suggests that one of the

4. Walter Benjamin, “Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik” (1919), in vol. 1 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, 99; “The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism,” trans. David Lachterman, Howard Eiland, and Ian Balfour, in vol. 1 of Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 172.

most important responsibilities of the actor is the spacing out of his actions, so as to make them, he says, “quotable” (*GS*, 2:529, 536). Brecht himself, writing in 1930, contrasts conventional dramatic theater with epic theater in terms very close to these. Dramatic theater is distinguished by “growth,” “linear development,” “evolutionary determinism” (the “fate” of central characters), by the fact that “one scene makes another”; epic theater is distinguished by “montage,” “curves,” “breaks” [*Sprünge*], and by the fact that “each scene [is] for itself” (*ST*, 20; *BT*, 37). For the productions of epic theater Brecht insists on “a radical separation of the elements.” This means, for example, that “words, music, and setting must become more independent of one another” (*ST*, 21; *BT*, 38), but in referring to “elements” Brecht also has in mind single incidents, movements of figures or groups, sound effects, even single sentences and exclamations (*ST*, 165–66, 230; *BT*, 200–201, 214, 100–101). The separate constellations of the action, he maintains, and even the distances between them, have dramatic significance (*ST*, 230; *BT*, 214). In theory, at least, the spacing out of the elements, their emerging separateness, makes for a recurrent shock effect—a hallmark of montage—and it is this shock-engendered form, by means of which situations are set off against one another, that creates a transitory space in which contradictions in social conditions can present themselves and society’s causal network can be traced. The individual *gestus*, which as such is always a social *gestus*, at the same time figures in a historical discourse; in Benjamin’s interpretation (in the first version of “What Is Epic Theater?”), it discloses the actuality of “dialectics at a standstill” (*GS*, 2:530)—a central category of *The Arcades Project*, begun some four years earlier. The dialectically charged *gestus* is the rock of astonishment on which the stream of things breaks (*GS*, 2:531)—notice that the “standstill” at issue here is not anything simply static;⁵ to vary the metaphor, the *gestus* is an eddy formed in reflecting the currents of history at a particular point in space and time. Brecht calls it a “nodal point,”⁶ an emergent knot of tension at which the situations of the story collide to reveal specific social forces at work or to unmask the crisis of authority. In his didactic, indeed combative, intention (deliberately opposed to the process of catharsis that has marked traditional theater since Aristotle), the radical montage of elements works against the goal of “fusion,” whether this be understood in terms of the generation of a dominant mood or

5. See, on this point, Norbert Bolz and Willem van Reijen, *Walter Benjamin*, trans. Laimdota Mazzarins (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1996), 41–42.

6. See *Theaterarbeit*, ed. Bertolt Brecht et al. (Dresden: Desdner Verlag, 1952), 256; see also *Brecht on Theatre*, 241.

atmosphere or in terms of the empathic identification with characters on the stage. In Brechtian parlance, montage counteracts the “witchcraft” [*Magie*], the “hypnosis,” the “fog,” the state of “trance” [*Entrückung*], induced in the spectators of bourgeois theater—a state which Brecht compares to that of sleepers dreaming restlessly with their eyes open (*ST*, 142–43; *BT*, 187), and which we might liken to the “strange stare” and “spell-stopped” stance of the characters in Shakespeare’s *Tempest* who come under the influence of Prospero’s art. “My high charms work,” observes Prospero, “And these, mine enemies, are all knit up / In their distractions.” Here is a classical locus for the conception of distraction as not just counterproductive but actually stupefying.⁷ What for the bourgeois is a salutary diversion from his “troubles” is for Brecht, in the 1930s, a form of “drug trafficking,” a “sordid intoxication” and bondage. In place of the theater as witches’ caldron or sirens’ isle, he establishes the theater as laboratory, which seeks to induce clarified emotion and pleasurable knowledge. There, it should be noted, the method of montage is *opposed* to that of distraction.

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Now, in his attitude toward the idea of intoxication—*Rausch*, of course, is a pivotal term in Nietzsche’s later philosophy—Benjamin parts company with Brecht. This will be immediately apparent to any reader of *The Arcades Project* who remembers the emphasis placed on the anamnestic intoxication of the flaneur wandering the streets at all hours, on the gambler’s presence of mind in the intoxication of play, or on the enchantment of the collector who both loses himself and renews himself in gazing on his object (*AP*, M1,5; O12a,2; H1a,2).⁸ All these instances of “intoxicated experience” [*rauschhafte Erfahrung*] (*AP*, M1a,2)—with which Benjamin, at one point, implicitly conjoins Baudelaire’s evocation of the “religious intoxication of great cities” (*AP*, J34a,3; cf. J84a,1)—point toward a more complex conception of the problem of *distraction* than we get in the essays on Brecht, or

7. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. Robert Langbaum (New York: New American Library, 1964), 95–96, 111 (act 3, scene 3, lines 88–90 and 95; act 5, scene 1, line 61). In Prospero’s epilogue, the spell of art entails freedom for artist and audience alike.

8. Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*, vol. 5 of his *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982); *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999). Hereafter, *The Arcades Project* is cited parenthetically as *AP*. References are to Benjamin’s system of filing his materials by convolute (for example, Convolute M) and item number (for example, 1,5 or 12a,2).

indeed from Brecht himself.⁹ Being carried away—which is what distraction and intoxication have in common, and which is what links them, classically, to the concept of madness—does not necessarily exclude a certain profane illumination (*GS*, 2:297 ff.; *SW*, 2:209 ff.).

This more complicated attitude, as I indicated at the outset, is developed in Benjamin's most famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," which focuses the problem in the workings of film. In the third version of the essay, with which he was occupied from 1936 to 1939, and which expands the discussion of distraction, Benjamin quotes the author Georges Duhamel, who voices a complaint made often enough by critics of the cinema during the second and third decades of its commercial existence: "I can no longer think what I want to think. My thoughts have been replaced by moving images" (*GS*, 1:503). Indeed, comments Benjamin, the train of associations in the person wishing to contemplate one of these images is immediately *interrupted* by new images, and this, Benjamin goes on to say, constitutes the shock effect of film, "which, like all shock effects, seeks to induce heightened attention" [*Geistesgegenwart*, meaning also "presence of mind"] (*GS*, 1:503). One may think here not only of the Brechtian alienation effect—which, as we've seen, aims to sharpen attention by means of interruption—but also of the practiced vigilance required to follow such things as big-city traffic, trading on the floor of the stock exchange, or collective jazz improvisation.¹⁰ For Benjamin, such high-speed vigilance is as much a defining feature of modern experience as distraction itself is. In other words, when he asserts that reception in distraction is becoming increasingly noticeable in all areas of art today, and is moreover a symptom of profound changes in human "apperception" (such as unsettle the possibility of relaxed contemplation, of mentally "dwelling"), he is offering both a description and a challenge.¹¹ Reception in distraction is

9. Concerning the difference between Benjamin and Brecht on this point, see Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin, Cinema, and Experience: The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology," *New German Critique* 40 (winter 1987): 218–19.

10. This applies a fortiori to the way in which the improvising jazz musician himself listens to the improvisations of the others in the group—both as a group and as other individuals—and responds to the surprises. The musician must have at his disposal a set of (variable) moves, to paraphrase Benjamin, in order to perform this task, which involves equal measures of spontaneity and knowledge, or receptivity and productivity. The deflection of attention here is manifold and concentrated, for the player is both carried away and in control.

11. Benjamin's own word for the work of art essay was *programmatisch*. See vol. 5 of his *Gesammelte Briefe, 1935–1937*, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt: Suhr-

conditioned, first of all, by the dynamics of modern technology, by the technologization of things—the accelerated pace of life, the rapid transitions of modern media, the press of commodities and their programmed obsolescence, and so on. At the same time, it is a covert measure of the ability to perform new tasks of apperception, for *successful* reception in distraction presupposes that a mastery of certain tasks has become habitual. What is at stake here, it would seem, is a dialectical mode of reading that effectively masters the technological apparatus—as the film actor masters the recording devices on the set—with the aid of the apparatus itself. The actor places the apparatus in the service of his triumph over it; this triumph of what appears to the audience to be the actor’s humanity is a product of the use that the actor makes of his own self-alienation in the face of the camera. His mastery therefore presupposes, as well as promotes, an interpenetration of nature and technology, physis and technē. His and the audience’s humanity is vindicated insofar as it is absorbed by, and in turn absorbs, the apparatus—which puts our humanity to the test.

The essay on technological reproducibility makes it evident that distraction, in a properly modern context, must itself be understood dialectically—that is to say, beyond the simple opposition of distraction and concentration (or, in Brecht’s terms, distraction and recognition). The challenge, Benjamin suggests (in a notational schema to the artwork essay entitled “Theory of Distraction”¹²), is to appreciate “the values of distraction,” which he associates with a convergence of educational value and consumer value (*Lehrwert* and *Konsumwert*) in a new kind of learning (*eine neue Art des Lernens*). In this positive attitude toward the production and experience of distraction, he is anticipated by his colleague Siegfried Kracauer. To be sure, Kracauer’s discussion of the Berlin *Lichtspielhäuser* (or picture palaces) of the mid-twenties, with their incorporation of film screenings into a revue-

kamp, 1999), 193, 209; also 200, 230 (*Programmschrift*). On Benjamin’s conception of the artwork as reflecting historical changes in the mode of human sense perception, a conception deriving in part from the art historian Alois Riegl, see Michael W. Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Literary Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), 156–58.

12. Walter Benjamin, “Theorie der Zerstreuung” (ca. 1935–1936), in vol. 7 of his *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989), 678–79; “Theory of Distraction,” trans. Howard Eiland, in vol. 3 of Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 141–42. In *Walter Benjamin: Zwischen den Stühlen* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1981), 273, Werner Fuld associates the motif of distraction with the idea of freedom.

like show involving a series of production numbers, and with their “homogeneous cosmopolitan audience . . . addicted to distraction [*zerstreuungssüchtig*],”¹³ appears at first to echo the viewpoint represented by Duhamel in Benjamin’s artwork essay: The interior design of the *Lichtspielhäuser*, as well as the character of their programs, serves “to rivet the viewers’ attention to the peripheral, so that they will not sink into the abyss. The stimulations of the senses succeed one another with such rapidity that there is no room left between them for even the slightest contemplation” (314; 326). Nevertheless, Kracauer argues, what the audience encounters in “the fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions” is its own fragmented reality. In their motley parade of “externalities,” these shows convey a momentary sense, at least, of the disorder of society—unless, that is, the motley has been concealed beneath a contrived appearance of “artistic unity,” which in fact is usually the case. In Kracauer’s view, this evasion of the truth of fragmentation implicit in the discontinuous revue form is part of a more general failure on the part of film producers: namely, their subordination of the revolutionary potential of cinematography—which includes its ability to reveal the most hidden facets and unexpected stations of ordinary existence—to the obsolete conventions of bourgeois theater. Putting an original spin on what was by then a familiar demand for a cinema freed from the influence of theater, Kracauer calls for “a kind of distraction that exposes disintegration instead of masking it” (317; 328). Such distraction would have a “moral significance” (315; 326).

Kracauer does not himself use the term *montage* in connection with the revue form that occasions a positive idea of distraction. But we have only to recall the references to “music hall and circus” in Sergei Eisenstein’s discussion of the “montage of attractions” to grasp the pertinence of the term here. Eisenstein’s conception of montage, of course, develops out of his work as set designer and director in the Moscow Proletkult Theater in the early twenties, where he experimented with multiple planes of action on the stage, mounting several scenes simultaneously and crosscutting between them, where he sought to obviate conventional perspective by disjoining and foregrounding all the elements of the composition or by employing several perspectives at once (as in a cityscape), and where he came to regard acting itself as a form of montage insofar as a character’s

13. Siegfried Kracauer, “Kult der Zerstreuung” (1926), in *Das Ornament der Masse* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), 313; “Cult of Distraction,” in *The Mass Ornament*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 325. Subsequent references to this essay and its translation are cited parenthetically by page numbers only.

gestures and movements are meant to *epitomize* an extended emotional and intellectual process within a particular person. On the stage, “the ‘montage of attractions’ . . . turned each episode of the play into a separate ‘number’ and gathered them into a unified ‘montage’ on the pattern of a music-hall programme.”¹⁴ As applied to the continuously changing flow of imagery in the motion picture (there is, of course, a paradox hiding in this term), the montage of attractions necessitated a dynamic composition in time, a construction in transformation, through which the various individual “cells” of the action would compose a rhythmic whole in the collision of sequences. In other words, “there is no lack of composition” where montage is in force, “but the composition does not take precedence over the detail.”¹⁵ Imbued with the modernist principle that “perceiving is building,” Eisenstein could herald an “entirely new era of constructive possibilities” made possible by “the magic power of montage,”¹⁶ a power historically conditioned, as he says, since the forms it assumes in the movies reflect contradictions and conflicts within actual events. The main outlines of what he calls “montage thinking,”¹⁷ as it operates in both horizontal and vertical dimensions, could be traced in virtually all the contemporary arts, though film remained the model for such thinking. With this invocation of the exemplary status of the cinematic medium—a position not uncharacteristic of the heyday of montage aesthetics in the twenties—we are back again to Benjamin’s theory of distraction, which is also a theory of perception, and the key role played by film in habituating “the masses” to this new mode of experience and this new architectonics. To cite once more the programmatic language of Benjamin’s artwork

14. Sergei M. Eisenstein, *Towards a Theory of Montage* (1937–1940), trans. Michael Glenny (London: British Film Institute, 1991), 231.

15. I am quoting here from Jacques Rivière’s description of the choreography of Vaslav Nijinsky. See “*Le Sacre du Printemps*” (1913), in *The Ideal Reader*, trans. Blanche A. Price (New York: Meridian, 1960), 138. Rivière says that Nijinsky approached “each object according to its own orientation. . . . The way in which Nijinsky has treated the movements of groups shows the same effort to espouse details, to discover and bring out individual orders. . . . By breaking the movement and bringing it back to the simple gesture, Nijinsky has put expression back into dance. . . . Acid and hard, . . . its contours have been . . . dulled by no culinary art . . . ; there are no . . . poetic blendings; there is no trace of atmosphere” (136, 137, 139, 125).

16. See Sergei Eisenstein, “Perspectives” (1929) and “The Dynamic Square” (1931), both translated by Jay Leyda, in *Film Essays*, ed. Jay Leyda (1968; reprint, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), 41, 61.

17. Sergei Eisenstein, “The Unexpected” (1928), in *Film Form*, trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, 1949), 27. On montage as the unity of sequence and simultaneity, see Eisenstein, *Towards a Theory of Montage*, 86; on the problem of (continuous) transition, see 192.

essay: The cinema is the authentic *Übungsinstrument*, or training device, for the sort of reception in distraction that is coming into being in all areas of contemporary art and that is symptomatic of a new kinetic apperception, one opened out and agitated, as it were jolted. What makes film instrumental in the cultivation of such a decentered reception is, it is now clear, the metamorphic mechanism of montage.¹⁸ Montage is no longer opposed to distraction, as in the essays on Brecht, but is its vehicle.

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The opposition now would seem to be between *mere* distraction and, shall we say, productive distraction—between distraction as a skewing of attention, or as abandonment to diversion, and distraction as a spur to new ways of perceiving. In either case, a certain wandering or dispersion makes itself felt. As I suggested at the beginning of this essay, both ideas of distraction can be found in *The Arcades Project*. The negative view is reflected in passages concerned with commodity fetishism, specifically with the world exhibitions and with the entertainment industry. In section 3 of the Exposé of 1935, we are told that the world exhibitions that began to be organized in Europe after 1850 “open a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted [*um sich zerstreuen zu lassen*]. The entertainment industry makes this easier by elevating the person to the level of the commodity. He surrenders to its manipulations while enjoying his alienation from himself and others” (*GS*, 5:50–51; *AP*, 7). Several of the Brechtian themes (they are Marxian themes as well, of course) are noticeable here, in particular the association of distraction with complacent self-surrender in a crowd and willingness to be manipulated by the apparatus; this makes for alienation in a negative sense, an oblivious, morally paralyzing estrangement from oneself and others. The experience is one of being mastered by the apparatus—Benjamin may also be thinking, in this regard, of the fascist mass rallies of his own day—instead of mastering it for the good of humanity. The Exposé goes on to connect the “enthronement of the commodity” to, first, the art of Grandville—whose illustrations turn the whole of nature into a display of luxury goods, thus caricaturing the fatal “luster of distraction” that emanates from the commodity—and, second, to the conception of the *Gesamtkunst-*

18. The privileged position of the cinema vis-à-vis other contemporary arts has to do with its intrinsically technological nature: “Film: unfolding [*Auswicklung*] <result [*Auswirkung*]?> of all the forms of perception, the tempos and rhythms, which lie preformed in today’s machines, such that all problems of contemporary art find their definitive formulation only in the context of film” (*AP*, K3,3).

werk, or total work of art, which finds its chief representative, at this period, in Wagnerian opera. Whereas Grandville's satire encourages critical awareness of the technologized cult of commodities, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* would "seal art off from the developments of technology" and, with its solemn rites, conceal from its audience the fact of its own commodification. The techniques of distraction serve here—as in the world exhibitions that pave the way to the entertainment industry—to "abstract from the social existence of human beings." Even Baudelaire "succumbs" to the "rage" for Wagner (*GS*, 5:56: *AP*, 11).

Of course, the arcades themselves—these showplaces of nineteenth-century "industrial luxury," with their corridors of shop windows and their sundry allures (including the allure of prostitutes)—are dedicated to the "distraction that transfigures the commodity." In this "strange zone," as Louis Aragon puts it in his *Paysan de Paris* (that Surrealist travel guide which helped inspire *The Arcades Project*), *all* is distraction (*tout est lapsus*)—"lapse of attention as well as of inattention."¹⁹ Carried along by the relentless "current of objects" (60; 47), knowingly absorbed in a "cult of the ephemeral" (21; 14), as celebrated in this modern-archaic "underwater world" (52; 40), Aragon's narrator confesses himself the "master-slave of his vertigos" (125; 102). "Everything distracts me indefinitely, except from my distraction itself [*tout me distrait indéfiniment, sauf de ma distraction même*]. A feeling akin to nobleness of heart prompts me to exalt this surrender, and my ears are closed to the reproaches you make me" (12; 7–8). What is striking about these passages from Aragon is the way they blithely transcend our duality of positive and negative distractions. The most ordinary or workaday objects—and we are treated, in his distracted prose, to phantasmagoric inventories of such objects, as encountered in strolls through the Passage de l'Opéra (a display of sponges, a target pinned on the back of an old telephone directory at a gunsmith's, an emerald-colored skin lotion bearing the name *Velouté Naturel*, a somber, oak-paneled hairdressing salon for men)—the most fugitive of distractions, are grist to his philosophic mill and engine of his exaltations. For Aragon, here, there is no opposition between entertainment as an end in itself and the education of apperception, or indeed between intoxication and education: "Some everyday object . . . plunged me into . . . mystery. I loved this intoxication which I knew how to put into effect. . . . The way I saw it, an object became transfigured: it did not so much manifest an

19. Louis Aragon, *Paysan de Paris* (Paris: Gallimard, 1926), 60; *Paris Peasant*, trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Exact Change, 1994), 47. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically by page numbers only.

idea as constitute that very idea. Thus it extended deeply into the world's mass" (140–41; 113–14). The same analytic reveling in material and commercial ephemera, in a half-submerged world of things (*Dingwelt*), is a defining feature of *The Arcades Project*. Just as the film prop becomes an actor while the film actor becomes a prop, and just as objects in films (like objects in fairy tales) take on a life of their own, so the physical spaces and furnishings and milieus of Benjamin's arcades evince a ghostly animation, like creatures of a lost world. They wear a face. Benjamin does not explicitly call attention to the positive value of distraction in *The Arcades Project*, as he does in the work of art essay, but he repeatedly demonstrates it through his cultural physiognomics, his widely diffused researches into the historical "rags" and "refuse" of the nineteenth century (*AP*, N1a,8). And, like Aragon, he conjures an "intoxicated experience" of city life that, in its often startling concreteness, counteracts the propensity for "abstraction from the social existence of human beings," the propensity attributed to the commodity in the Exposé of 1935. No doubt we have come up against the famous Benjaminian ambivalence at this point—in particular, the ambivalence toward commodity fetishism and "the crowd." But the simultaneity of positive and negative valorizations of distraction and intoxication is also, presumably, a function of the "ambiguity of the arcades" (*AP*, R2a,3). In Benjamin's presentation, they are *both* laboratory and atmosphere.

I mentioned earlier the leading role played in the *The Arcades Project* by the figures of the flaneur, the gambler, and the collector. In the case of each of these nineteenth-century types, Benjamin applies a peculiarly double-edged formula: The flaneur is characterized, once again, by "anamnesic intoxication," a recollection not dulled but heightened by intoxication; the gambler, by an intoxicated presence of mind, a divinatory reading of his chances that is entirely obedient to bodily reflex; and the collector, by an entranced absorption in his chosen object that allows him to see through it to a profile of the historical epoch from which it derives, that makes of his object in its showcase a "magic encyclopedia" of that epoch (*AP*, H2,7; H1a,2). Benjamin's use of the term *Zerstreung* is double-edged in another sense. There is an ontological distraction as well as an epistemological one. Meditating the task of the collector, Benjamin writes, "Perhaps the most deeply hidden motive of the person who collects can be described this way: he takes up the struggle against dispersion [*Zerstreung*]. Right from the start, the great collector is struck by the confusion, by the scatter [*Zerstreutheit*] in which the things of the world are found" (*AP*, H4a,1). To the things in their primordially strewn state the collector brings his distraught concern, historically informed as it is. It is much the same with the flaneur, as he wan-

ders aimlessly, senses primed, through the labyrinth of streets and neighborhoods, gathering news of “what has been” through the medium of building styles or place-names, and with the gambler, as he gives himself up to the flow of the game, dispelling all gravity, in order to come to a decision at the last possible moment. All three are at home, relatively speaking, in the world’s scatter. They are touched and inspired by it. They spend themselves and expand themselves in being dispersed to the current of objects. And their reception in distraction, like that of the movie audience, is not merely visual but tactile, or visceral; it involves their whole sensorium, as illuminated by memory (for the experience in “intoxicated experience” is long experience [*Erfahrung*]). Their struggle against dispersion succeeds only by dint of studious abandonment to it, and this is the source of their presence of mind as something bodily.

The ontological scatter that is accessible to an intensively scattered perception bespeaks a crisis of the object, a crisis of meaning. What I referred to above as the technologization and commodification of things (involving, as it does, the unmooring of metaphysical substance) can be seen as a manifestation of this crisis. From an aesthetic point of view, it is a crisis of form, entailing, for the modern artist, the challenge of discovering a form commensurate with the entropic or centrifugal tendency of modern experience, with what in fact resists integration and closure. An articulation of dispersion, a dis-integrated form, a meaning in shock: Is this not a possible purchase on what is meant by “literary montage” in *The Arcades Project* (*AP*, N1a,8)?²⁰ To be sure, this project as a whole, with its persistent documentary intention and its improvisatory arrangement of materials (an arrangement dictated mainly, it appears, by the course of Benjamin’s studies), would seem to combine the most concrete sort of content with the most indeterminate sort of form. But perhaps it can be said that the montage of fragments (excerpts and reflections) which Benjamin has assembled in this text—assuming that it *is* a text, at least de facto, and not just a notebook—does work soberly to mirror the scatteredness of things, especially of

20. On the “nominalist” context for montage theory, see Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 231–34 (*Stimmigkeit und Sinn*, “Krise des Sinns”); *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 154–56 (*Coherence and Meaning*, “The Crisis of Meaning”). Compare Ernst Bloch’s reflections on montage, understood as “Wege im Einsturz” (paths in the midst of collapse) and “Hohlraum mit Funken” (hollow space with sparks), in *Erbschaft dieser Zeit* (1935; reprint, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1962), 22, also 17, 224, 369; *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville Plaice and Stephen Plaice (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 8, also 3, 205, 335.

things perceived in an urban environment, and, as it were, en passant. The centrifugal tendency would be an element of the work itself, complementary to a constellatory tendency. For it is not by any means simple scatter that we find here; the historical objects of Benjamin's collection, with their store of "secret affinities" (AP, R2,3), are sprung together, so to speak, in thematic arcs and tend to communicate with one another, intermittently, through a multitude of channels. They tell a story, first of all, a story about the life and death of an architectural form, about the entrance of the artist into the marketplace and into the cycles of class warfare, about the technological and administrative transformation of the modern city, about the dream life of an epoch as manifest in its cultural products, most generally about the interpenetration of past and present in the field of the "dialectical image." This spatiotemporal interpenetration—by virtue of which the present, as dreamt once by the past, awakens from the past it itself dreams—conditions the key motif of "precursors" in the text (that is, the anticipations and afterlives of cultural innovations), as well as the key motif of superimpositions. It is worth noting, in this regard, how often Benjamin returns to instances of superimposition in his evocation of nineteenth-century interiors and street scenes, museums and exhibitions, illustrations and window displays. Such effects play a part in what he calls "the masks of architecture" (AP, F1a,1). The flaneur sees—or rather feels—the ghosts of earlier times and places haunting the street corners and building facades he passes by (AP, M1,1; M2,4); the collector, in gazing into the distances of his object, summons up the various stages of its history (AP, H2,7); the hashish eater is witness to "the colportage phenomenon of space," a myriad of phantasmal figures and happenings from the past populating the room he inhabits (AP, M1a,3); the man who waits encounters an image of the expected woman superimposed on that of some unknown woman (AP, M°, 15); the young Marcel, at the opening of Proust's great novel, quoted by Benjamin toward the end of *Convolute K*, finds a whole series of remembered rooms in which he had formerly slept whirling madly through the darkness of the bedroom in which he awakens one night in a state of disorientation (AP, K8a,2).²¹ In these and many other passages of *The Arcades* (and this is true of *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert* [Berlin childhood around 1900] in a somewhat differ-

21. In a conversation with Benjamin in 1928, André Gide spoke of Proust's obsession with "processes of the cinema, with superimpositions, dissolves." See Benjamin's "Gespräch mit André Gide," in vol. 4 of his *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Tillman Rexroth (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972), 505; "Conversation with André Gide," trans. Rodney Livingstone, in vol. 2 of Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 94. The original French is printed in vol. 7 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, 621.

ent sense), we meet with “a past become space” (GS, 5:1041; AP, 871), a past embedded in things, as the etymon is embedded in a word. Memory is spatialized, at such moments, in more or less perceptible image-strata, something as in cinematic superimposition, or photomontage. One might also think of it as a collage effect, or a sort of palimpsest, through the translucencies of which the present is inscribed as the “essence of what has been” (AP, D°,6).²² In the experience of a single passage, understood as a threshold in space and time, there may be a coexistence and coming-to-terms of distinct events, or levels of an event, including our reception of the passage in what Benjamin names “the now of recognizability,” that critical moment of interpretation at which a particular historical object attains to legibility, is actualized in a particular reading (AP, N3,1).²³ In other words, the montage operates on both horizontal and vertical planes of language,

22. This stratified inscription has affinities with the Baudelairean conception of *modernité*, of a present-day worthy of becoming antiquity, as reflected in Convolute J of the *Passagen-Werk* and in the essay produced directly from the materials of Convolute J in 1938, “Das Paris des Second Empire bei Baudelaire.” At stake in this citation (that is, appropriation and [re]enactment) of the poet’s theory is an idea of allegory, understood as a form of superimposition and interpenetration. See, for example, the discussion of Charles Meryon in the context of this Baudelairean problematic: “For in Meryon, too, there is an interpenetration of classical antiquity and modernity, and in him, too, the form of this superimposition [*Überblendung*]—allegory—appears unmistakably” (vol. 1 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, 591; “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” trans. Harry Zohn, forthcoming in vol. 4 of Benjamin, *Selected Writings*). See also vol. 6 of Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe, 1938–1940*, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2000), 65.

23. Benjamin’s theory of reading, as conditioned on the primacy of the present, echoes Nietzsche in particular. On the necessity of interpreting the past from out of the highest energy of the present, see section 6 of “Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben” (1874), part 2 of *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, in vol. 1 of Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke*, ed. Karl Schlechta (Frankfurt: Ullstein, 1980), 250–51; *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1980), 37–38. See also Henri Bergson, *Matière et mémoire* (1896; reprint, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1939), 170; *Matter and Memory*, trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer (New York: Zone, 1991), 153. For Benjamin, the present moment wakes to itself only insofar as it awakens in itself a past. This dialectic is elucidated by Irving Wohlfarth in an unpublished paper, “Erwachen aus dem zwanzigsten Jahrhundert?” delivered at Barcelona in September 2000. “It is *his own* day and age . . .,” writes Wohlfarth, “that makes it possible for the historian to focus his lens on the past . . . ; and only by this roundabout way back into the past does his own day and age come into view. . . . To write history is to determine the present-day; both activities are forms of dream interpretation” (my translation). The Benjaminian conception of awakening out of and into the dream may be compared to the Heideggerian conception of *Entwachen*. See Martin Heidegger, *Zur Sache des Denkens* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1976), 32: “So ist das Erwachen aus der Seinsvergessenheit zu ihr das Entwachen in das Ereignis.”

of image space,²⁴ drawing the attention through various sequences as well as into the depths. We can thus see how a richly diversified diffusion factor—not unallied to the apperception of “modern beauty”—is built into the compositional tendency of the work itself.

No doubt this makes for a peculiarly distracted reading experience, even if we read the text straight through from beginning to end. We make our way through the maze of passages like a flaneur at the mercy of his sensations: With a little practice, we start to pick up echoes and sense the approach of apparitions as we focus in on some detail, which has suddenly come to life amid the shadows and the dust. Through the kaleidoscope of distractions, epoch-spanning interpretive constellations take shape, and coalesce, with each shock of recognition: facets, perhaps, of the great “constellation of awakening” which Benjamin, at one point, posits as the immanent goal, the entelechy, of his “unfinishable” project on the arcades (*AP*, N1,9; m2,1). In the dialectic of awakening that governs the thought of this strange ongoing reclamation project, we come awake only to the degree that we penetrate the dream.

24. The term *Bildraum* appears at the end of Benjamin’s 1929 essay “Der Surrealismus,” in vol. 2 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, 309–10; “Surrealism,” trans. Edmund Jephcott, in vol. 2 of *Selected Writings*, 217–18.

Of Philosophical Style—from Leibniz to Benjamin

Peter Fenves

This essay seeks to be nothing more than a commentary on three consecutive entries in Convolute N of Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. Of course, this convolute, which was, until recently, the only one translated into English, has served as the point of entrance and center of attraction for a large number of readers—and with good reason: Nowhere else does Benjamin discuss more directly the stakes of his massive study, and nowhere else, with the possible exception of Convolute K, with its depiction of the Copernican turn in historical intuition, does Benjamin more explicitly lay out the points around which his puzzling venture revolves. Entries on the dialectical image, the idea of progress, and the meaning of Marx, all under the promising title “Epistemological [*Erkenntnistheoretisches*], Theory of Progress,” give Convolute N its characteristic momentum. The remarks on which this essay comments have almost nothing to do with such matters, however, except *e contrario*, for they momentarily interrupt a sequence of entries in which the character of the image, the figuration of progress, and the thought of Marx are brought into line. Coming immediately after two suggestive citations—one from a work on nineteenth-century French litera-

ture that compares certain “images” of the past to “those that are imprinted by light on a photosensitive plate,”¹ the other from a poem by Victor Hugo, in which progress is represented as an “eternal reader” who “leans on its elbows and dreams” (N15a,2)—and coming immediately before an extensive engagement with Marx’s work, the entries I discuss are easily overlooked. Neither the passages Benjamin cites nor his own brief remarks seem especially profound, nor are they likely to strike readers as anything more than an incongruous plea for clarity. The topic toward which this commentary gravitates is the locus of this incongruity, one of the very few technical terms of traditional philosophical discourse that Benjamin adopts for his *Arcades Project*, as if it were the last word of—and his last word on—what is generally called “philosophy,” namely the technical term *monad*.

1. N15a,3, or “Du Style”

Benjamin quotes the following passage from Joseph Joubert’s eclectic treatise “Du Style”:

It is through familiar words [*mots familiers*] that style bites into and penetrates the reader. It is through them that great thoughts circulate and are accepted as genuine, like gold or silver imprinted with a recognized seal. They inspire confidence in the person who uses them to make his thoughts more sensible [*sensible*]; for one recognizes by such usage of common language someone who knows life and things, and who keeps in touch with the world. Moreover, these words make for a frank style. They show the author has long nourished the thought or the feeling expressed, that he has made them so much his own, so much a matter of habit that, for him, common expressions suffice to express ideas that have become natural to him after a long conception. In the end, what one says in this way will appear more truthful; and clarity is something so characteristic of truth that it is often confused with it. (N15a,3)

To which Benjamin adds, “Nothing more subtle than the advice: be clear so as at least to appear true [*um wahr wenigstens zu erscheinen*]. Imparted

1. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), N15a,1. Despite the remarkable achievement of Eiland and McLaughlin, which reiterates both the fluency and the hesitations of Benjamin’s text, all translations in this essay are my own. Subsequent references to *The Arcades Project* will be cited parenthetically by convolute.

in this way, the advice to write simply, which usually harbors rancor, has the highest authority" (N15a,3). In light of the untroubled self-assurance that Joubert both describes and manifests, which rises above those lowly perspectives from which resentments are generated, Benjamin identifies a desideratum wholly removed from the dynamics of competitive desire: the style for which to strive. With these words—"On the style for which to strive [*Über den Stil, der zu erstreben ist*]"—he introduces the three passages from, and commentary on, Joubert's "Du Style" that make their way into *The Arcades Project*.

The style for which to strive—by whom, however, Benjamin never says—has a self-destructive structure: It erases itself as style, one style among others. Whatever else may be said of style, at least this much is clear: It implies a degree of contingency.² Either one style is chosen over another, or a particular style is distinguishable from other possible ones. Scientific art-historical or literary scholarship, of course, may seek to discover laws through which the contingency of style can be brought into order along the lines of Heinrich Wölfflin's conception of *Stilentwicklung* (stylistic development), but this effort is a sure sign that style is at bottom a mat-

2. The relation of style to contingency is well articulated in the following entry from Convolute S: "The idea of eternal return in [Nietzsche's] *Zarathustra* is, according to its true nature, a stylization of the worldview that in Blanqui still allows its infernal traits to be recognized. It is a stylization of existence down to the smallest fragments of its temporal procession. Nevertheless, *Zarathustra's* style disavows itself in the doctrine that it expounds" (S8,3)—a doctrine according to which everything necessarily returns and therefore a doctrine in which contingency has been fully extinguished. That *Zarathustra* is styled and stylizes existence means, however, that it "disavows" the doctrine it seeks to impart. Of course, there are those who dispute the placement of style under the category of contingency, and yet even in these cases, a substitute for the term *style* is generally found. Any instructive example of this trend can be found in Roland Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero*, which begins by identifying style with "Necessity" and proceeds to invent a new technical term, "mode of writing," which, aligned with choice and therefore contingency, covers what is often called "style"; see Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero, and Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1967), esp. 9–18. A comprehensive exposition of the topic "Benjamin and style," to say nothing of Benjamin's style, is outside the bounds of this small commentary. Some of his most incisive remarks on style can be found in the compact formulations of "Gedanken und Stil," in Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 7 vol. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972–91), 6: 202. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *GS*. For an analysis of Benjamin's style, which takes its point of departure from this fragment and corresponds to the commentary I have undertaken here, see Samuel Weber, "Benjamin's Writing Style," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly, 4 vol. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1:261–64.

ter of contingency.³ The style for which to strive, by contrast, moves in the opposite direction: a function of “habit” in the first place; in the end, toward the semblance of truth. By virtue of the style that erases its own stylizations, readers, according to Joubert, can be affected by what they read: “bitten into,” “penetrated.” This effect takes place without the reader noticing anything untoward, for no stylistic effects, no new style and, above all, no *Jugendstil* or even *Jugendbewegungstil*—the highly stylized “youth movement” style that characterizes some of Benjamin’s earliest writings—makes itself known: “*Jugendstil*,” Benjamin writes in Convolute S, “is the stylizing style *kat exochen*” (S8,2). By contrast, the advice of Joubert, which has an old-fashioned air, proposes a style that does away with stylistic gestures so that readers may be struck unawares by what they read. And those who read this advice in the course of passing through Convolute N, having learned from the previous citation, drawn from Victor Hugo’s poem “Paris incendié,” already know that the “eternal reader,” who “leans on his elbows and dreams,” is, for Hugo and perhaps Benjamin as well, the very image of progress. Being penetrated unawares by reading can even be seen to generate this image: Without being able to walk, eternally stuck in place, readers can step forward only in their dreams. And if the sense and direction of the movement available to an “eternal reader”—who, as such, interrupts the temporal continuum—had to be designated, the only term that would be remotely adequate is *awaking*.

2. N16,1, or “De Stylo philosophico”

Joubert’s advice is hardly original. On the contrary, its authority derives from its distinguished lineage: classical rhetoric, which tends to favor the plain style over more elaborate ones; Cartesian methodology, which makes clarity into a criterion of truth; and romanticism, which celebrates popular speech over learned discourse. The direction of Benjamin’s attraction to “Du Style” becomes clearer, however, from the next entry: “A stylistic that would be worth discussing [or a stylistic that would be worthy of

3. *Style* was a much-contested term during the years in which Benjamin began to develop his thought, and much of the conflict centered around the stylistic studies of Heinrich Wölfflin, especially his *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe; das Problem der Stilentwicklung in der neueren Kunst* (Munich: Bruckmann, 1915). One of the minor oddities of Benjamin’s *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* is the fact that its preface takes up the problem of style, but precisely not the Wölfflinian “problem of stylistic development.” And the body of the book, for its part, eschews discussion of baroque style per se.

discourse: *Eine Stilistik, die der Rede wert wäre*] would arise for anyone who could develop Joubert's dialectic of prescriptions [*Dialektik der Vorschriften*]. Thus Joubert recommends the use of the familiar word [*mot familier*] but warns against a particular language [*langue particulière*] (N16,1). This recommendation would not be worthy of much commentary if it were not for the fact that its formulation runs counter to its directive: The phrase "dialectic of prescriptions" can scarcely be considered a *mot familier* and may even rank among the very *langues particulières* that the recommendation proscribes. Joubert, for his part, seems oblivious to the dialectical character of his stylistic advice, for, as Benjamin dryly notes, it must be "developed"—elaborated, presumably, beyond the abstract distinction between opposing terms. Two accounts of the style for which one should strive have developed in precisely this direction: one written a century before Joubert, and another written a century after him; more exactly, one written by Leibniz, who prefaces his edition of a philosophical-rhetorical treatise composed by a late Italian humanist with a baroque *dissertatio* entitled (among other things) "De stylo philosophico"; and the other written by Benjamin, who prefaces his own philosophical-rhetorical treatise on the baroque with an exposition of (among other things) the four "postulates" of "philosophical style." These prefaces can be seen to represent, to use Benjamin's words, inspired by a Leibnizian image of infinite envelopment, the "fore-history and after-history [*Vorgeschichte und Nachgeschichte*]" (N10,3) of the "dialectic of prescriptions" that Joubert leaves undeveloped. In all three cases—Joubert, Leibniz, Benjamin—the recommendation remains the same: no *langue particulière*, which is to say, for Benjamin, no "new terminologies" (GS, 1:217), for Leibniz, no technical terms.

First, then, the "fore-history" of Joubert's undeveloped "dialectic of prescriptions":

As Leibniz writes in his extensive preface to Mario Nizolio's *De veris principiis et vera ratione philosophandi contra pseudophilosophos*, which often goes by the title "De stylo philosophico" (1670),⁴ there is nothing para-

4. Wilhelm Gottfried Leibniz, "Dissertatio praeliminaris: de alienorum operum editione, de Scopo operis, de Philosophica dictione, de lapsibus Nizolio," in Mario Nizolio, *De veris principiis et vera ratione philosophandi contra pseudophilosophos*, ed. W. G. Leibniz (Frankfurt am Main, 1670). This work was reprinted in Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften; later, Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften; later, Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften and the Akademie der Wissenschaften in Göttingen, multivolume edition in seven series (Darmstadt and Leipzig: Reichl; later, Berlin: Akademie, 1923–), 6, 2:420. Hereafter, subsequent ref-

doxical about the idea of philosophical style; on the contrary, as Leibniz argues, philosophical discourse cannot hope to advance the cause of knowledge unless it reforms itself, and an indispensable element of this reformation lies in the development of its own style. Of three “praiseworthy marks of speech”—clarity, truth, and elegance—only the first two constitute, according to Leibniz, criteria for the evaluation of philosophical discourse: “Speech is elegant if it is pleasant to hear or read. But since our discussion concerns philosophical discourse and the style that befits it, we shall omit elegance for the present, although we admit that it can be of great service in securing attention, in moving minds, and in impressing things more deeply on the memory” (A, 2:409). Of the two remaining marks—clarity and truth—the former takes precedence over the latter, for, as Leibniz insists, “the truth of a proposition cannot be known unless the meaning of its words is known, that is, unless it is clear (by the definition of clear speech)” (A, 2:409). The priority of clarity over truth gives rise to an audacious proposal that reverberates throughout much of Leibniz’s subsequent work. He seeks to develop a new kind of logic that corresponds to the tropological dimension of traditional rhetoric: “I almost believe that, just as there are two parts of rhetoric, one concerned with combining words elegantly, ornately, and effectively, the other with stirring emotions, so there are also two parts of logic, the one verbal, the other real: one concerned with the clear, distinct, and proper use of words or with philosophical style, the other with the regulation of thinking” (A, 2:409). As a *logica verbalis*, philosophical style disambiguates discourse. If a language could be developed in which ambiguity were banished from the beginning, however, this “logic of words,” like the corresponding rhetoric of tropes, would prove redundant. And nothing is more important to Leibniz than the completion of this project, which is to say, the construction of a “universal characteristic,” an “exact language,” or, as he sometime says, a “rational system of writing.”⁵ In such a characteristic, language, or writing system, which Leibniz proposed even before he wrote “De stylo philosophico” at the age of twenty-four, there would no longer be any choice of

erences are to the sixth series, which collects the texts deemed to be strictly logico-philosophical, and are cited parenthetically as A. For a more extensive analysis of Leibniz’s preface to Nizolio, see my essay, “Antonomasia: The Fate of the Name in Leibniz,” in *Arresting Language: From Leibniz to Benjamin* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001).

5. On the relation between Leibniz’s programs for both “natural” and “artificial” languages, see the insightful essay of Albert Heinekamp, “Ars characteristica und natürliche Sprache bei Leibniz,” *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 34 (1972): 446–88.

terms. Without choice, there is no contingency, and without contingency, no style: Even the stylistic criterion of clarity erases itself as the prospect of obscurity disappears into the diaphanous medium of “exact language.”

Philosophical style, for Leibniz, approaches this point of evanescence but remains a style still, one of several, by virtue of its impure media: the so-called natural languages. For all the audacity of Leibniz’s dissertation on philosophical style—which appears in the same year that Spinoza makes the momentous announcement that “God does not have a peculiar style of speaking [*Deum nullum habere stylum peculiarem dicendi*]”⁶—it responds to a long line of philosophical-rhetorical reflection, the end point of which is Nizolio’s polemic against the “barbarism” of “pseudophilosophical” discourse. Pseudophilosophers, according to Nizolio, are those who call themselves philosophers, which is to say, anyone who derives authority from *the* philosopher, namely Aristotle. Aristotle may write in Greek, yet he is still a barbarian, for he does not write Greek well, according to Nizolio; and the same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for scholastic pseudophilosophers. Leibniz, who corrects Nizolio’s Latin as well as his Greek,⁷ concludes his treatise by defending Aristotle and enumerating Nizolio’s lapses in reasoning. Nevertheless, without polemics, and yet with a sense of imminent danger, Leibniz reiterates, amplifies, and deepens Nizolio’s critique of philosophical discourse—not only in favoring the nominalists over the realists but also by showing the degree to which the last generation of scholastics violates the fundamental imperative of philosophical style: Its discourses are unclear, and the origin of this generational obscurity lies in an addiction to *languages particulières* or, as Leibniz says, to technical terms.

Those terms by which the art of philosophy separates itself from other discursive arts, the very signs of being a philosopher, are to be avoided at all costs. Or, as Leibniz writes, associating technical terms with animals associated with the scenery of melancholia and the insinuations of Satan, “Technical terms are to be shunned as worse than dog or snake” (A, 2:411). Instead of inventing technical terms, philosophers should make do with familiar ones, and the reason for this surprising choice of familiarity from this lifelong champion of artificial languages lies in the imperative of clarity: “The greatest clarity is found in commonplace terms with their popular usage

6. Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670), reprinted in *Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt (Heidelberg: Winter, 1925), 3:34.

7. See the introductory remarks of Quinirus Breen to his edition of Nizolio, *De veris principiis et vera ratione philosophandi contra pseudophilosophos*, ed. Q. Breen, 2 vol. (Rome: Fratelli Bocca, 1956), 1:lxiii–lxi.

retained. The more popular the terms, the clearer the discourse. . . . This is indeed one of the fundamental rules of philosophical style, although often violated, especially by metaphysicians and dialecticians” (A, 2:414). The violation of this rule is generally justified with reference to the general ambiguity of familiar words. But, according to Leibniz, the act of stipulating a meaning cannot reduce ambiguity; on the contrary, such displays of sovereign subjectivity exacerbate the danger of arbitrariness that they are meant to allay. Only by entering into something like the “objective” course of words themselves, regardless of what any individual speaker says these words mean, can discourse be disambiguated. And the place to enter this course is at its origin: “One must make sure above all to choose among the many usages that one which is nearest the origin” (A, 2:411). Karl Kraus once wrote a famous line that Benjamin then cites: “Origin is the goal [*Ursprung ist das Ziel*],”⁸ to which Leibniz might have added, “and originality is the principle of philosophical style”—not, however, in the derivative sense of subjective spontaneity, which Leibniz did not know and would not have accepted in any case, but, on the contrary, in the original sense of “clinging to the origin” (A, 2:411).

The reduction of a word to its origin—using the original sense of the term *reductio* (leading back)—can be accomplished only under one condition: Nothing is without a reason. This momentous principle, which Leibniz would first announce a few months after publishing “De stylo philosophico,”⁹ is valid for discourse as well—or valid for the torturous course of discourse first of all. For every twist or turn of “natural languages” a reason can be rendered, and the same is true of every other dimension of language, including the primordial relation between significant sound and action designated. To cite one of the many examples drawn from one of Leibniz’s later dissertations on natural languages, the sound *str* appears to be a natural response to the experience of stress; rudimentary formalizations of this psychophysical outburst find expression in a series of English words, including *strong*, *strength*, *strive*, *strike*, *struggle*, *stretch*, and *strain*.¹⁰ In the pref-

8. Karl Kraus, *Worte in Versen*, 2 vol. (Leipzig: Verlag der Schriften von Karl Kraus, 1919), 1:69 (“Der sterbende Mensch”); Benjamin, *GS*, 1:701.

9. See the twenty-fourth—and last—axiom of the “Fundamenta praedemonstrabilia” that Leibniz established for his treatise of 1671, *Theoria motus abstracti seu Rationes Motuum universales, a sensu et Phaenomenis independents*: “Nothing is without reason [*Nihil est sine ratione*]” (reprinted in Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften*, ed. C. J. Gerhardt, 7 vol. [1875–90; reprint, Hildesheim: Olms, 1978], 4: 232; hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as G).

10. Leibniz, “Epistolica de historia etymologica dissertatio,” in Stefano Gensini, *Il Naturale*

ace devoted to philosophical style, Leibniz does not lead his inquiry so far back, however; instead of examining the primordial process of onomatopoeia, he concerns himself with the apparently aberrant course of already constituted languages. Only by tracing these turns of discourse can philosophers reduce the multiplicity of uses to which any given term has been put—without relying on the arbitrary, melancholic, tyrannical, or Satanic stipulation “This means that.” The herald of such arbitrariness is Hobbes, whose “more than nominalism” (A, 2:428) Leibniz gingerly mentions near the end of his preface in preparation for a more extensive confrontation.¹¹ Each word bears its complete history in itself, and for this reason discourse can be clarified in the proper sense of the term. Insofar as tropes multiply the uses of words, they run counter to the demands of philosophical style, and Leibniz makes clear that they are no more welcome in philosophical discourse than are technical terms: “So far we have shown that technical terms are to be avoided as far as possible. Now we must note that, whether terms are familiar or technical, they ought to involve no *tropes* or *few and apt ones*” (A, 2:418). Insofar as the movement of a word away from its origin takes place by means of fairly regular schemata, however, rhetoric, understood as “the analysis of the tropes of discourse” (A, 1:339), is an indispensable element of, and necessary prolegomenon to, philosophical style.

Instead of producing this prolegomenon, however, Leibniz invents a trope: a “canal of tropes” (A, 2:411). By means of this metaphor, which is a metaphor for the movement of a word from one field of discourse to another, and therefore a metaphor for the very act of metaphORIZATION, Leibniz makes up for a lacuna in his exposition. And this, too, corresponds to the metaphor he makes up, for a canal makes up for a lack in nature. Just as the development of philosophical style in “natural languages” compensates for the absence of a fully functional “exact language,” the trope “canals of tropes” makes up for the lack of a fully developed exposition of the modes through which words depart from their origins. And just as literal canals compensate for the lack of navigable rivers, “tropical” canals are created for want of available words. The nonnatural character of canals does not imply that they

e il simbolico: saggio su Leibniz (Rome: Bulzoni, 1991), 219; §17. An indispensable guide to Leibniz’s linguistic studies is Sigrid von der Schulenburg, *Leibniz als Sprachforscher*, ed. Kurt Müller (1937; reprint, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1973).

11. See the untitled dialogue of 1677 (A, 4:20–25) in which the name *Lucifer* unexpectedly appears as the Latin translation of the Greek word *phosphōros*, the discovery of which (by Heinrich Brand) Leibniz celebrates in one of his poems; see Leibniz, *Gesammelte Werke: Aus den Handschriften der Königlichen Bibliothek zu Hannover*, ed. Georg Heinrich Pertz (1843–47; reprint, Hildesheim: Olms, 1966), 4:38.

are *unnatural*; rather, canals of tropes cannot fail to be *technical*. Their technicality consists not in setting something up but, rather, in digging underneath. And for the most part, the channels of discourse are excavated without the awareness of speaker and listener alike; for this reason, languages cannot fail to appear *natural*—outside, beyond, and before the “theses,” conventions, and impositions of self-conscious subjects. And for the same reason, as Leibniz emphasizes some years later in the *Nouveaux Essais*, languages are exposed to an ineradicable “indetermination” (A, 6:260). With the trope “canals of tropes,” Leibniz succinctly captures the natural-historical character of human languages: There is a reason for every turn in the crooked course of our discourse, but the reason for any particular trope generally escapes notice, as if “tropical” currents were, in effect, the linguistic equivalents of the “little perceptions” (A, 6:53–55) that forever escape our notice: as imperceptible to both speaker and hearer as the tiny rustlings of microwaves that we confusedly perceive as the roar of the sea.¹²

Only by virtue of artificial turns do historical languages develop naturally. Yet these turns simultaneously muddy the waters of discourse—so much so that philosophers must navigate in reverse the canals of discourse to their source.¹³ And this venture is dangerous. The only one who tried to do so, according to Leibniz, was Julius Caesar Scaliger, who died in midstream, without leaving a record of his “tropical” adventures: “Although we have greater erudition in the thought of the son [Joseph Justus Scaliger],” Leibniz writes, “we have lost greater acumen and philosophy in the father’s book of origins” (A, 2:410). For his part, however, Leibniz demurs. A desideratum, indeed an indispensable element of philosophical style, remains outstanding: a global map of linguistic flux, which would show those continents that, by virtue of their immobility, give “natural languages” their consistency, regularity, and translatability. The absence of this map is thus far from insignificant. The very term around which philosophical style revolves—*clarum*—is tinged by a trope, as Leibniz readily acknowledges: “*Clear* is that which is well perceived,” he clearly asserts, and then adds, “so discourse is clear if

12. For a perceptive analysis of Leibniz’s conception of “little perceptions,” see Richard Hertz, *Die Lehre vom Unbewußten im System des Leibniz* (1905; reprint, New York: Olms, 1980). Hertz, incidentally, served as the director of Benjamin’s doctoral dissertation.

13. For an analysis of Leibniz’s theory of tropes, see Francesco Piro, “Are the ‘Canals of Tropes’ Navigable? Rhetoric Concepts in Leibniz’ Philosophy of Language,” in *Im Spiegel des Verstandes*, ed. Klaus Dutz and Stefano Gensini (Münster: Nodus Publikationen, 1996), 137–60.

the meaning of all its words are known, at least to the attentive" (A, 2:408–9)—attentive enough to “perceive” the flow of *clarum* from the field of vision to that of discourse. The clarity of *this* perception (the perception of a word’s flow) depends on *another* mode of perception, and the perception of this trope—that of *percipere*—requires, in turn, still another mode of perception, and so on ad infinitum. Perhaps it is in this, the open seas of discourse, that the Scaliger *père* got lost. As more and more canals are broached, the continents become less and less distinguishable from the sea. As the land disappears, however, so do its canals. And the demise of the distinction between solid shore and fluid medium spells the shipwreck of the communicative cargo the canals are supposed to carry. In the end, only swamp or sea remains—which is to say, after we transfer Leibniz’s trope back to its original field of application, either total obscurity or limitless indeterminacy. As “tropical” storms become more devastating, the degree of discursive alteration tends toward the infinitesimal and the number of alterations toward the infinite; all terms, in turn, disappear into a free but nonfunctional flow of discourse. Signification would be arrested under these stormy conditions, and discourse, having lost the means of its movement, would become at once immediate and useless.

Only one kind of word could be immune from such “tropical” storms: words—I refrain from using the word *terms* here—that are constitutively incapable of departing from their origin. Such words could not be used, which is to say, they could not support any communicative cargo. Yet the immunity that words of this kind would enjoy from the danger of tropes could not simply be attributed to their refusal to enter into something like communication; rather, such words—if there are any—would be immune from the vagaries of usage only insofar as they “virtually contain” the totality of their turns, to use a scholastic term Leibniz would adopt some years after “*De Stylo philosophico*.”¹⁴ Since the totality of turns is infinite, these words cannot be defined. Still less are they susceptible to the arbitrary, melancholic, or Satanic stipulation of sovereign subjects. Leibniz’s dream of a “universal characteristic” or “alphabet of human knowledge” (G, 7:198–99) may have little in common with the search for such “original” words, but the motivation behind the dream and the search is the same: discover—

14. See the so-called “Discourse on Metaphysics,” esp. A, 6, 4:1540. The “Discourse” adopts scholastic terminology, including the word *virtual*, which has a prominent function in Dun Scotus’s thought. For Benjamin’s notes on the Scotian idea of “modes of signification,” see *GS*, 6:22.

or invent—a language wholly removed from the sphere of subjective intentionality. Hence Leibniz's attraction to the Kabbalah, an attraction that was strong enough to motivate his publication under another man's name of a Christian-Kabbalistic treatise in which creation is presented as the function of a combinatory calculus of aleph-numeric characters.¹⁵ If the land in which “canals of tropes” are cut is comparable to the Netherlands, the place in which words cannot be affected by arbitrary stipulation is like that of paradise. During the years in which Leibniz studied Kabbalistic texts with the greatest intensity, after having visited Spinoza in Amsterdam, Leibniz discovers a name for that to which everything else is reducible: *monad*. Since everything is reducible to—and reduced in—monads, they function as representations of everything in an abbreviated manner. Disobeying his own prohibition on technical terms, Leibniz adopts a wholly unfamiliar word as a privileged name for primary being. Access to the order of monadic reduction and representation depends, however, on a faculty entirely different from that in which phenomena are perceived. Benjamin finds a name to such a faculty: *Urvernehmen*, “primordial perception” (*GS*, 1:217).

The “after-history,” then, of Joubert's dialectic of stylistic prescriptions:

In accordance with the dialectics of stylistic prescriptions, Benjamin proposes the term *Urvernehmen* in the very paragraph of his preface to the *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* where he revokes the right of philosophers to invent their own terms. The revocation of this right is an immediate consequence of the *Urvernehmen* in which a philosopher becomes a philosopher in the first place, for *Urvernehmen* is completely outside the sphere of finite intentions. Wishing to say something and perceiving in a primordial manner are antithetical attitudes. In the central section of the preface, “The Word as Idea,” Benjamin makes his case against “wishing to say” by deter-

15. As Anne Becco has shown, Leibniz was probably the ghostwriter of a Kabbalistic text published under François-Mercure van Helmont's name, *Quaedam praemeditatae & consideratae Cogitationes super Quatuor priora Capita Libri Moysis, Genesis nominati* (Some premediate and considerate thoughts on the first four chapters of the first book of Moses called Genesis) (Latin, 1697; German, 1698; English, 1701); see Anne Becco, “Aux sources de la monade: Paléographie et lexicographie leibniziennes,” *Études Philosophiques* 3 (1975): 279–94. For a well-informed discussion of Leibniz's relation to late representatives of the so-called Christian Kabbalah, especially Knorr von Rosenroth (who composed the *Kabbala denudata* and with whom Leibniz lived for months at a time) and François-Mercure van Helmont, see Allison Courdert, *Leibniz and the Kabbalah* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995).

mining the cause of the philosopher, which, like the “task of the translator,” consists at bottom in forgoing communicative cargo:

It is the cause of the philosopher, through presentation [*Darstellung*], to set up once again in its primacy the symbolic character of the word in which the idea comes to self-understanding, which is the opposite of all communication directed outward. Since philosophy may not presume to speak as revelation, this can happen only by an act of remembrance returning to a primordial perception [*Urvernehmen*]. Platonic anamnesis does not perhaps stand far from this remembrance. Only that it is not a matter of an intuitive making-present of images; rather, in philosophical contemplation the idea releases itself from the innermost region of reality as the word that reclaims its name-giving rights. In the end, however, Plato does not stand in such a state, but rather Adam, father of human beings as father of philosophy. Adamic naming-giving is so far from being mere play and arbitrariness [*Spiel und Willkür*] that it is, on the contrary, precisely in such naming-giving that the paradisaical stance confirms itself as one that does not yet have to struggle with the communicating meaning of words. As ideas give themselves without intention in the act of naming, so must they renew themselves in philosophical contemplation. In this renewal, the original perception of words restores itself. And so in the course of its history, which has so often been the object of mockery, philosophy is quite rightly a struggle over the presentation of a very few, ever-returning words—of ideas. Within the domain of philosophy, therefore, the introduction of new terminologies [*neuer Terminologien*], which are not strictly confined to the domain of concepts but aim for the ultimate objects of contemplation, is troublesome. Such terminologies—misfortunate acts of naming in which intention plays a greater role than language—dispense with that objectivity with which history has given the principal locutions [*Hauptprägungen*] of philosophical reflection. (*GS*, 1:217)

Despite its baroque dedications and numerous digressions, Leibniz’s preface to Nizolio’s treatise could serve as a model of clarity in comparison to Benjamin’s preface, which tends toward a mode of obscurity from which few readers have escaped, including perhaps Benjamin himself. Yet Leibniz can be so admirably clear only because he remains silent about his ability to perceive not only the movement of a term such as *percipere* from one field of discourse to another but the general motility of terms: a potentially infi-

nite motility that, as he himself emphasizes, cannot be arrested by saying "This henceforth means that." For the most part, such motility is of no consequence; for philosophical discourse, however, this is not the case: According to Benjamin, who seeks to distinguish philosophy from science without altogether severing the relation of philosophical discourse to scientific inquiry and without, in reverse, making philosophy into something like "the theory of science," the infinitude of certain words is the sole object of philosophical contemplation. Such words cannot fail to be monadic. Entirely isolated from the communicative function of discourse, these words are nevertheless far from static; on the contrary, each one runs counter to—and thus springs from—an incessant flow, and this springing forth from the flux of "becoming and passing away" (GS, 1:226) is, according to Benjamin, what is meant by *Ursprung* (origin), regardless of what speakers mean to say when they use this term. The flux of discourse is similarly transformed in each monadic word: It no longer succumbs to "becoming and passing away" and, instead, retains only its "fore- and after-history" (GS, 1:226). Whoever perceives these "original" words can do so, therefore, only in a primordial manner. The opposite of such perception is what Leibniz calls "apperception," the unity of which serves as a guide for the construction of all metaphysical terms.¹⁶ Apperception and primordial perception are, in this sense, mutually exclusive. Since apperception is synonymous with unity and oneness, this exclusivity means that *no one*, strictly speaking, can perceive in a primordial manner. *Adam*, for Benjamin, is a proper name for this "no one."

At least two consequences follow from the axiom "No one can perceive in a primordial manner." On the one hand, this axiom generates the postulates of philosophical style. Paradisal naming is as styleless as the "universal characteristic" Leibniz sought to construct. Philosophical discourse, by contrast, is styled—not arbitrarily so, to be sure, but in accordance with a set of four "postulates" that demand a mode of writing outside the sphere of sovereign stipulation and subjective intention: "The concept of philosophical style is free of paradox. It has its postulates. They are: the art of interruption in contrast to the chain of deductions; the tenacity of the treatise in contrast to the gesture of the fragment; the repetition of motifs in contrast to shallow universalism; the fullness of concentrated positivity in contrast to negating polemic" (GS, 1:212). If there are any doubts that these

16. See, for example, Leibniz's pedagogical letter to Queen Charlotte of Prussia: "This thought of *I*, who apperceives sensible objects and my own actions that result from it [*Cette pensée de moy, qui m'apperçois des objets sensibles, et de ma propre action qui en resulte*], adds something to the objects of sense" (G, 6:502).

postulates apply especially well to the author of the “Monadology,” they are put to rest by the footnote added at this point to the original version of the preface: “Reference to Leibniz?—All systems are true in what they assert, false in what they deny” (*GS*, 1:931).¹⁷ And even if these four postulates bear little resemblance to Leibniz’s plea for clarity, they nevertheless issue into an imperative with which he would have agreed: no *neue Terminologien*, no *termina technica*, no *langues particulières*.

On the other hand, the axiom “No one can perceive in a primordial manner” dictates the fashion of the philosopher, which has only a single “must”: *don’t be one*. There are doubtless many ways not to be a philosopher, and Leibniz, for his part, explored quite a few—from mining engineer to court intriguer. So, too, did Benjamin, including, for example, by analyzing the function of the court intriguer in seventeenth-century drama or, for another, by investigating the state of Parisian fashion around 1850. Familiar words such as *boredom*, *collector*, and *panorama* replace technical terms such as *subjectivity*, *transcendental*, and *speculative*, in accordance with a program that Nizolio, for one, would have wholeheartedly approved. Presenting oneself as something other than a philosopher is a fashion “must,” in other words, for anyone who wishes to be a philosopher. Not to be one at all, to be other than one—this is considerably more difficult, especially if, as the transcendental philosophy of the scholastics proposes, *unum* and *ens*, “one” and “being,” are convertible terms. Not to be one is the same as not being at all. Being so would be possible—if it is possible—only for a constitutively inconsistent plurality, which, by virtue of its inconsistency, cannot be made into a unit of ordered elements. The fashion of the philosopher is, for this reason, the de-fashioning fashion *kat exochen*: It consists in forever going out of fashion. The historical character of philosophy follows from this feature: Leibniz, to cite Benjamin’s privileged example, may think that his “Monadology” gives insight into the continuous order of creation, when in retrospect—after his thought has gone out of fashion and thereby become philosophical for the first time—it can be seen to present the discontinuous structure of ideas. More radically still, outside the parameters of the preface to the *Trauerspiel* book, the fashion of the philosopher demands

17. The only other postmedieval philosopher to whom Benjamin’s postulates of philosophical style apply especially well is one with whom he unfortunately had no contact: Ludwig Wittgenstein. And in Wittgenstein, too, the dialectic of stylistic prescriptions develops in a particularly concentrated manner. All of the reflections here on *mot familier* and *langue particulière* could be fruitfully rethought in relation to both the *Tractatus* and the later writings.

that the title “philosopher” be denied to anyone who claims to be one. Only a “no one” in the strict sense—a constitutively inconsistent plurality—can be one. Sometimes, for Benjamin, the name for such a “no one” is *youth*, which rejuvenates itself by passing away. At other times, the name for the “no one” is *workers*, but only workers who abstain from working. In *The Arcades Project*, the name for “no one” is at once more exacting and more perplexing: *the collective*, of which it might be said that no one is a member but from which no one is excluded. Fashioning itself after the philosopher, as the philosopher neither it nor anyone else can be, the “no one” that goes by the name *collective* awakens. And in the moment of waking, perception is restored.

3. N16,2, or “Beautiful Sayings”

“All beautiful sayings are susceptible to more than one signification [*Toutes les belles paroles sont susceptibles de plus d’une signification*],” Joubert writes, and Benjamin cites: “When a beautiful word presents a sense more beautiful than the author’s, it is necessary to adopt it [*Quand un beau mot présente un sens plus beau que celui de l’auteur, il faut l’adopter*]” (N16,2). Whereas, for Leibniz, elegant formulations can be of service to philosophical discourses, even if elegance cannot be one of the criteria by which they should be judged, for Joubert, “beautiful sayings” are constitutively ambiguous; they defy the demand for clarity and thereby undermine the style that both Leibniz and Joubert recommend. A perfectly clear discourse, without a trace of equivocation, would be the death of discursive beauty—and perhaps the birth of a sublime word. In any case, if Joubert is trustworthy—and Benjamin makes no comment about this, the last of his citations from “Du Style”—at least this much is clear: Beauty plays havoc with clarity. Yet beautiful sayings also, and for the same reason, do damage to the secure shore on which meaning is supposed to be anchored and through which the flux of discourse is generally halted. The sovereign subject who, secure in its knowledge of itself as one, intends to say something or do things with words. “More than one signification” indicates that this subject is in abeyance. Such is Joubert’s wholly inconspicuous prescription, his unfamiliar “il faut,” which, as long as it remains in effect, cannot be determined by what Joubert himself wishes to say, if what he says is beautiful; on the contrary, it is necessary to “adopt” a more beautiful sense. And the terms of this “whenever” cannot themselves be prescribed in advance of its appearance. Whenever a beautiful word “presents a more beautiful sense

[*présente un sens plus beau*],” it no longer has anything to do with meaning, which is to say, using the technical vocabulary Joubert invents in spite of himself, it has nothing to do with signification. The presentation of *sens*, in other words, consists in the recession of *signification*.¹⁸ And this recession corresponds to the emptying of the world and the loss of its meaning: a devastating defeat—and reward—for anyone caught in the mournful circle of sovereign stipulation.

The “whenever” in which signification recedes is, in short, “now-ever,” which is to say, using Joubert’s familiar term, *the present*, or, using Benjamin’s *langue particulière*, *Jetztzeit*. At this point, or in this time, technical terms are both proscribed and indispensable. Here, then, the dialectic of stylistic prescription develops to its limit. Those words in which sense presents itself are isolated from the crosscurrents of discourse—without, however, being fixed or static: “All beautiful sayings are susceptible to more than one signification.” Such sayings turn into ironic technical terms—“ironic” because they do precisely the opposite of what technical terms are meant to accomplish: terminate the flow of discourse. As technical terms against the very intention of such terms, words for the time at which sense presents itself are constitutively incapable of being familiar. Few words have a greater ability to absorb signifying intentions than *monad*, which, for all the success or failure of Leibniz’s scientific and philosophical programs, cannot be considered familiar either in the early eighteenth or the early twentieth century—or, needless to say, now.

Nevertheless, *The Arcades Project*, which describes itself as “a commentary on a reality” (N2,1) and generally avoids the technical terms of philosophical discourse, comes to revolve around the word *monad*. The third of the five propositions that delineate “the doctrine of elements [*Elementarlehre*] of historical materialism” combines one of the most familiar expressions of everyday German with one of the very few “principle locutions” of philosophical discourse that owe nothing to popular discourse: “Wherever a dialectical process carries itself out, there we have something to do with a monad [*Wo ein dialektischer Prozeß sich vollzieht, da haben wir es mit einer Monade zu tun*]” (N11,4).¹⁹ As if this, the central proposition of the doctrine

18. On sense and signification as something like technical terms, see Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le Sens du monde* (Paris: Gallilée, 1993), esp. 183–85.

19. For an attempt—largely unsuccessful—to understand what Benjamin may have meant with the term *monad* in his later work, see Hartmut Engelhardt, “Der historische Gegenstand als Monade,” in *Materialien zu Benjamins Thesen “Über den Begriff der Geschichte,”* ed. Peter Bulthaup (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), 292–317.

of elements, if not of the entire convolute and, in turn, *The Arcades Project* as a whole, were in need of clarification, Benjamin adds a similarly perplexing parenthetical cross-reference: “(On the monad, see N10a,3)” — an entry, however, in which the word *monad* is nowhere to be found. On the contrary, the thought at the center of this entry, which has become one of the most famous in the entire project — the thought of arresting thought — runs counter to the term *monad* as it was originally conceived, for, as Leibniz insists, the creator alone has the power to interrupt the continuum of monadic perceptions.²⁰ This is a consequence of each monad’s eternal isolation from every other. The monad of which Benjamin writes, by contrast, goes one step back in the same direction — toward an isolation from time: It consists in the event of becoming timeless, the coming-to-pass of an isolation from both the historical continuum created by “empathy” and the temporal continuum generated in “inner-time consciousness.” Such an event may be what Joubert seeks to capture — and Benjamin wishes to rescue — when he announces with impeccable clarity: “There is a time even in eternity” (O13a,4). By virtue of its isolation from the temporal continuum, sprung forth from both “becoming and passing away,” “eternal” in a sense unknown to classical metaphysics, the monad of which Benjamin writes is in his own term “original” and, to this extent, historical.

The historical character of Benjamin’s monad distinguishes it from a contemporaneous attempt to make good on Leibniz’s reductive program, namely transcendental phenomenology. According to Edmund Husserl, to whom Benjamin allusively responds in Convolute N,²¹ monadic consciousness reveals itself by way of a radical abstention from all positional acts; it is, in other words, the function of a “reduction” that leads the philosopher back to the origin of the world in pure transcendental consciousness. A privileged

20. According to the “Principles of Nature and Grace,” each of the deaths we witness is only a “long stupor [*un long étourdissement*],” whereas “a death in the rigorous sense [*une mort à la rigueur*]” is an interruption in which “all perception would cease” (G, 6:600).

21. In an essay on the “crisis of Darwinism” of 1929 Benjamin implicitly associates his own philosophical and philological itinerary with a series of contemporaneous thinkers, the first of whom is Husserl: “Husserl replaces the idealistic system with discontinuous phenomenology; Einstein replaces infinite, continuous space with finite, discontinuous space; [Edgar] Dacqué replaces infinite, flowing becoming with a forever-renewed insertion of life in limited, countable forms” (GS, 4:536). In one of the “*Lebensläufe*” Benjamin assimilates his own mode of “contemplation” [*Betrachtung*] to the so-called eidetic reduction (GS, 6:219). One might wonder the extent to which Adorno’s decision to attack phenomenology in *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie* was an attempt to dissuade Benjamin from associating his mode of “contemplation” with Husserl’s.

medium of such reduction is the fiction of world annihilation. On the basis of this fundamental fiction—which a younger Benjamin had associated with the “courage” [*Mut*] and “stupidity” [*Blödigkeit*] of the poet²²—consciousness can free itself from the mistaken, even mythological impression that it is one of the many things in the world, each of which “affects” every other. Whatever else might be said of their respective conceptions of the monad, Leibniz, Husserl, and Benjamin agree on one point: The monad is receptive to everything without being affected by anything. For Benjamin, if not for the other two, the ability of the monad to be receptive without being affected places it at the threshold of paradise. And for Benjamin, as for the others, the monad is the function of an abstention, reduction, or—to use the technical term Husserl proposes—*epochē*: For Leibniz, the monadological structure of creation reveals itself whenever each of us conceives of ourselves in such a manner that only God and I are seen to exist; for Husserl, the monadological structure of consciousness reveals itself whenever phenomenological researchers successfully disengage themselves from those “attitudes” according to which the mind conceives of itself as something affected by other things, including by the “highest” thing. Benjamin takes this reductive enterprise to its limit—so much so that *no one*, strictly speaking, *can carry it out*, least of all the studious philosopher.

The *epochē* toward which Benjamin orients himself not only disposes the world of substantial things, as Leibniz recommends, nor does it simply dispense with a substantive God, as Husserl requires; it does away with the apperceiving self in the same stroke. For Benjamin, then, “mental” exercises are inconsequential; only “historical materialist” techniques matter.

22. For Husserl's exposition of the monad, see, in particular, the last of the Cartesian Meditations, which is devoted to the unveiling of the transcendental sphere of monadological intersubjectivity; *Cartesianische Meditationen: Eine Einleitung in die Phänomenologie*, ed. Elisabeth Ströker (Hamburg: Meiner, 1969), esp. 91–155; for Husserl's exposition of the “annihilation of the thing-world [*Vernichtung der Dingwelt*],” see *Husserliana: Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Husserl-Archiv in Leuven under the directorship of H. L. van Breda (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1950–), 3:115. Elsewhere I argue that Benjamin's 1915 essay “Two Poems of Friedrich Hölderlin” can be understood as an amplification, radicalization, and overcoming of the phenomenological program Husserl announces in the first volume of *Ideas*, which, as Benjamin notes in a letter of 1915, constitutes “Husserl's difficult, principal groundwork” (*Gesammelte Briefe*, ed. Christoph Gödde and Henri Lonitz [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995–], 1:302); see “The Paradisal *Epochē*,” in *Arresting Language*, esp. 191–200. And for a remarkable, wholly convincing analysis of Hölderlin's *Blödigkeit* in terms of stupidity, see Avital Ronell, *Stupidity* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 3–29.

And the sole aim of these techniques is the constructive disclosure of the “no one” that can carry out an otherwise impossible reduction. Only a constitutively inconsistent plurality qualifies as “no one” in the strict sense; being neither something in particular nor something in general, it cannot be conceived either as a unity of apperception or as a unit of perceptible elements. As a result, the name for such a plurality can be neither proper nor common. *Adam* is as inadequate as *youth* or *worker*, even if all three names are indispensable as formal indications of the “no one” in question. For the purpose of *The Arcades Project* its name is *the collective*. And the residuum of the reduction that it alone can accomplish lies outside of the sphere of consciousness—without being transposable to the nebulous regions of a “collective unconscious.” Benjamin’s term for this residuum has a familiar ring: *awakening*, which marks the threshold of consciousness and unconsciousness alike. The monadological structure of awakening—which is to say, of the reduction, the abstention, the *epochē*—is doubly reductive: *leading back* to the origin of history by way of a “bracketing” in which all positions of consciousness, all positings of political orders, and all dikes of culture burst asunder, it is at the same time, against the flow of time, a *miniaturization* of the ruptured world—and therefore its image. Following the fashion of a true philosopher, who declines to be one, Benjamin avoids the technical term *reduction* or *epochē*, preferring instead a more familiar word, namely *Verjüngen*, which suggests not so much rejuvenation as sheer juvenation: a mobilization of youth without the need for congregating adolescents.

What remains of the word *monad*, for its part, is the original spin from which it sprang: It names that which remains unaffected. The image of this paradisaical condition, as Leibniz famously notes, is the absence of windows—an absence that materializes itself in nineteenth-century Paris in panoramas, theaters, and arcades, the windows of which, as Benjamin notes, look upward but not outward.²³ (The counterpart to this materialization, today, one might add, may be Microsoft, which, for all its emphasis on miniaturization, from its name onward, wants nothing so much as endless expansion by

23. Nothing is better known about the monad than its windowlessness: “Monads have absolutely no windows through which anything could enter or leave” (G, 6:606). For Benjamin, this remark, which has a particularly baroque character, also gives insight into the architecture of “the true”: “The interest in panoramas is in seeing the true city—the city indoors [*im Hause*]. What obtains in the *windowless* house is the true. And the arcade, too, is a windowless house. The windows that look down on it are like loges from which one gazes inside, but one cannot look out from them. (The true has no windows [*Das Wahre hat keine Fenster*]; nowhere does the true look out to the universe)” (Q2a,1).

means of ever more inevitable “Windows.”) At any rate, *monad* is the word around which Benjamin’s own *langue particulière* comes to revolve. If, as he proposes, “wherever a dialectical process carries itself out, there we have something to do with a monad,” one could add: Whenever he coins a technical term, in accordance with the dialectic of stylistic prescriptions, that coinage has something to do with a monad. Because of their unfamiliarity, these words cannot enter into common currency. Or, to use Joubert’s terms, they cannot *bite*. Readers, in turn, remain as untouched, undisturbed, and unaffected as the monads themselves—only dialectically so, for Benjamin’s discourse, like the monadological structure toward which it tends, becomes the scene of vast disturbances “on a reduced-rejuvenated scale [*in verjüngtem Maßstabe*]” (N10,3), those disturbances, for example, of commentators who wish to make sense of the familiar yet irreducibly particular language of *The Arcades Project*.

On the Banks of a New Lethe: Commodification and Experience in Benjamin's Baudelaire Book

Michael Jennings

When the American painter R. B. Kitai imagined Walter Benjamin's Paris, he painted Benjamin sitting with Charles Baudelaire in an ambiguous space above which rise both an arcade and what Benjamin himself called "an open sky of cloudless blue"¹—perhaps that same blank sky that hangs over the Paris of Baudelaire's "Le cygne." Kitai's painting, "The Autumn of Central Paris. After Walter Benjamin," catches Benjamin between projects. Benjamin had worked, if at first intermittently but then with increasing intensity, since the late 1920s on a massive history of the mid-nineteenth century in France, which bore the working title *The Arcades Project* (*die Passagen-Arbeit*). Benjamin found himself, after about 1935, under pressure from the Institute for Social Research to produce in a publishable form some portion of the vast material he had assembled for *The Arcades Project*. He began in 1937 to extract and reorganize material from his accumulation of citations, commentary, and reflections—that is, from *The Arcades Project*—toward

1. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), N1,5. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *AP* and by convolute.

a book on Charles Baudelaire. He thus quite literally left the arcades and took Baudelaire with him. The arcades had, of course, served in Benjamin's notes toward his primal history (*Urgeschichte*) of the nineteenth century as the organizing metaphor, the figure and historical form around which the entire complex of social, cultural, political, and scientific history would have rotated.² Drawing extensively on *The Arcades* materials, Benjamin began to organize his texts not around an architectural form but around the figure of a single poet. He extracted several hundred pages of material from his notes and reorganized them into a book draft with three major sections, each of which in turn contained multiple chapters, with *The Arcades* fragments ordered as he would finally use them. This project, bearing the working title *Charles Baudelaire, A Lyric Poet in the Age of High Capitalism*, is, more than ten years after its discovery by Giorgio Agamben, still readable—in any language—only in a kind of samizdat version: to read Benjamin's book draft, one needs to reassemble—that is, cut and paste—a selection of passages from *The Arcades*.³

Why take such pains for what is, after all, for two thirds of its length only an advanced draft? Because the experience of reading the text that results from this reordering is fundamentally different from that of reading *The Arcades*. Obviously enough, the focus and, to a certain extent, rhetorical trajectories of the project changed. The book draft stands today as a pioneering effort to recast our image of Baudelaire and his historical moment. Baudelaire emerges for the first time as the quintessential modern—alienated, spatially displaced, saturnine. Much of this effect is achieved through a Copernican reorientation of the historical formation in which the poet is

2. Benjamin's most succinct definition of primal history occurs in *The Arcades*, N3a,2: "Primal history of the nineteenth century"—this would be of no interest if it were understood to mean that forms of primal history are to be recovered among the inventory of the nineteenth century. Only where the nineteenth century would be presented as original form of primal history—in a form, that is to say, in which the whole of primal history groups itself anew in images appropriate to that century—only there does the concept of a primal history of the nineteenth century have meaning." For a reading of this passage, see Michael Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987), 204–11.

3. Giorgio Agamben and I hope to edit and publish an English-language version of the Baudelaire book in the near future, but that will depend on cooperation from Benjamin's German editors, who have so far blocked publication in any language. For an important and philologically precise evaluation of the unpublished Baudelaire materials, see Michel d'Espagne and Michael Werner, "Vom Passagen-Projekt zum *Baudelaire*: Neue Handschriften zum Spätwerk Walter Benjamin," *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift*, no. 4 (1984): 593–657.

presented. The classical studies that preceded Benjamin's text had highlighted the early Baudelaire: his ties to Romanticism, the Swedenborgian mysticism of the *correspondances*, the flights into reverie, elation, and the ideal. Benjamin's reading emphasizes for the first time the other element of the dualism Baudelaire evokes in the section of *Les fleurs du mal* titled "Spleen and Ideal": Baudelaire's melancholy, his self-understanding as flotsam and jetsam on the tides of modernity. Benjamin's text achieves this by revealing Baudelaire as the preeminent poet of the urban capitalist metropolis. He is the flaneur, strolling through the mercantile arcades at a pace dictated by a turtle on a leash, a ragpicker, collecting images of that which has been discarded by the denizens of the metropolitan jungle. And Benjamin relates these features to historical processes: the flaneur's pace protests against the accelerating tempo at which urban life must be experienced; the ragpicker's accumulation of unrelated detritus from all walks of Parisian life figures nothing else but the division of labor, a prime cause of the fragmentation of that human experience. The book emphasizes, then, the same overriding concerns so evident in *The Arcades Project*: the rise of commodity fetishism in the big city and a concomitant dehumanization under capitalism. Baudelaire's lyric poetry, writes Benjamin, "breaks in its destructive energy not only . . . with the nature of poetic inspiration; it breaks—due to its evocation of the city—not only with the rural nature of the idyll, but it breaks—due to the heroic determination with which it makes poetry at home at the heart of reification—with the nature of the things. It stands at the place at which the nature of things is overpowered and transformed by human nature."⁴

Beyond these thematic shifts, the Baudelaire book has a narrative and rhetorical coherence absent over large stretches of the text published as *The Arcades Project*—which, after all, was Benjamin's provisionally ordered quarry of material from which he would have written his history.⁵ Or, to put it another way, the Baudelaire book provides an astonishing optic through which to study *The Arcades*, an optic that offers a perspective different from those offered by the Exposés Benjamin wrote in 1935 and 1939.⁶ The Baudelaire book, even in its fragmentary form, is in fact the definitive

4. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 8 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972–91), 1:1152.

5. Howard Eiland, in a recent conversation, has argued that Benjamin shaped the beginning sections of certain convolutes with this kind of narrative and rhetorical coherence in mind.

6. Both Exposés are included in *The Arcades Project*, the first as "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," the second as "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," *AP*, 3–26.

statement of Benjamin's maturity. He himself referred to the completed section of the book, "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," as "a miniature model," indeed a "very exact model," of the structure of the intended text on the arcades.⁷

Before moving to the main lines of my argument, though, I need to point out that there are very real costs associated with our leaving *The Arcades* and following Baudelaire out and into the open air. When we open the covers of *The Arcades*, we are greeted by the splendid mutterings of thousands of voices of the dead; this has always struck me as a moment not unlike that lovely sequence in Wim Wenders's *Der Himmel über Berlin* when the angels enter the *Staatsbibliothek* and hear the hum of those hundreds of internalized voices. The Baudelaire book reduces those voices in number and in complexity, and this is a grievous loss, for those voices—raised in song, in recitation, in stupefied admiration, in protest, in agony—have always seemed among the most fascinating, and the least understood, aspects of *The Arcades Project*. Paris, too, disappears as built environment and as text, as does much of the social and political history of the arcades themselves. The question needs to be asked, then: When we turn from *The Arcades* to *Baudelaire*, do we gain in clarity and theoretical punch what we lose in breadth and complexity?

Because the Baudelaire book is so seldom discussed, some sense of its structure may prove useful. The book has three sections. The first is entitled "Baudelaire as Allegorist." Benjamin is concerned here primarily with an analysis of the formal elements of Baudelaire's poetry, and especially with the *structural* logic that ties it to the baroque mourning plays, for whose stature as cognitive media of a special sort Benjamin had argued in his *Origin of the German Mourning Play* of 1924.⁸ This first section includes chapters called "Reception," "Affective Apparatus," "Aesthetic Passion," "Allegory," and "Melancholy." The second section—the only one completed—is entitled "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire"; it explores Baudelaire's many guises—as conspirator, flaneur, ragpicker, and hero—and examines the confluences and repetitions of antiquity and modernity in Baudelaire and indeed in French society in the mid-nineteenth century.⁹ The third section bears the title "The Commodity as Poetic Object" and

7. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1995–2002), 6:64, 131.

8. Published as *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977).

9. This section was first published in English in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the*

contains chapters on the commodity, the *nouveauté*, eternal return, spleen, loss of the aura, *Jugendstil*, and tradition. In what follows, I will focus on this third section because it contains, as Benjamin stated clearly, the theoretical armature of the entire project.¹⁰

As I have suggested rather elliptically so far, the Baudelaire book taken as a whole was meant to present a large-scale theory of modern experience. The particular exigencies of Benjamin's life and writing prevented the full development of that theoretical model, and its adumbration in this fragmentary text will remain its most extensive and cogent formulation. A very little bit of philology may be in order here. The middle section of the Baudelaire book, the essay we know as "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," was, in effect, rejected by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer.¹¹ They urged Benjamin to develop the central section of that central section—you begin to get a sense for the dizzying reductions to which *The Arcades* material was subjected in the late 1930s—and this urging led to the essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." This latter essay retains, from the larger project, the emphasis on a theory of experience. In "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin points repeatedly to the *structure* of experience in the mid-nineteenth century, remarking that it may be conceived in analogy to the structure of industrial work or gambling. But there are important ellipses at key moments of the essay. Early on, Benjamin jumps vertiginously from the notion of shock experience to a discussion of Baudelaire's poetry, with no hint of how that poetry is produced by shock, fixes the shock experience, or, with a few exceptions, thematizes it. When, late in the essay, Benjamin adduces his older concept of the aura in its relation to Baudelaire's work, it is similarly unclear as to just what it is that allows Baudelaire's work to shatter the aura or contribute to its decline. These ellipses are simply blank spaces in an argument produced by the more or less violent excisions of material from the larger corpus of the Baudelaire book.

The essay is primarily known for the very explicit formulation of the theory of experience with which it commences. Benjamin discriminates—

Era of High Capitalism, trans. Harry Zohn (London: New Left Books, 1972). A revised and annotated version of the essay is forthcoming in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, ed. Michael Jennings and Howard Eiland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

10. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, 6:186.

11. For an account of the debate between Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno—speaking for the editorial group at the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*—on this essay, see Jennings, *Dialectical Images*, 30–41.

in a formulation now given very wide currency—between long experience (*Erfahrung*) and isolated experience (*Erlebnis*). Long experience is presented as a coherent body of knowledge and wisdom that is not merely retainable in human memory but transmissible from generation to generation. The essay “The Storyteller,” with its rather nostalgic evocation of a pre-capitalist era, adduces oral literature as the privileged form of such transmission. Isolated experience, on the other hand, emerges in “On Some Motifs” as a form of experience bound to the shocks experienced by the stroller in the urban mass; isolated experience, far from being retainable or transmissible, is in fact parried by consciousness and leaves a trace in the unconscious. This somewhat labored interweaving of ideas from Freud, Theodor Reik, and, much to Adorno’s dismay, Georg Simmel, is generally taken to be the consummate expression of Benjamin’s long-developed theory of experience.

A reading of the full text of the Baudelaire *book* reveals this aspect of Benjamin’s theory as a partial argument with limited applicability. The bourgeois stroller’s shock experience in the urban mass is a specific and limited form of a more generally conditioned experience. The terms *long experience* and *isolated experience* developed in “On Some Motifs” do, of course, provide a conceptual map for conceiving one particular relationship within the innate structure of human experience; yet the theory adumbrated there says very little about the possible *objects* of that experience. And in every prior major articulation of Benjamin’s theory, those objects had played an important role in the determination of the structure of experience. It is this combination of innate structure and potential object that had preoccupied Benjamin from the time of his earliest meditations on experience in the years of the First World War; this combination can be said to determine, in fact, Benjamin’s contribution to a twentieth-century cultural theory of experience.

It is important that we understand that Benjamin’s theory of experience is, in important respects, opposed to a Kantian theory of experience, that is, to a theory of experience that proceeds from an articulation of the *structure* of human understanding. From his very earliest attempts to produce a philosophically informed theory, the period between 1912 and 1914, Benjamin emphasized the structures of historical time that produced particular potential objects of human experience. Benjamin can write in 1914 of “a particular condition, in which history appears to be concentrated in a single focal point . . . the elements of the ultimate condition do not manifest themselves as formless progressive tendencies, but are deeply rooted in every present in the form of the most endangered, excoriated, and ridiculed

ideas and products of the creative mind.”¹² Benjamin emphasizes here the materiality of these noetically charged fragments, their availability to ordinary experience. Benjamin completed his pre-Marxist theory of things as privileged bearers of knowledge in what we might call his epistemological trilogy: his dissertation, *On the Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, the essay “Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” and the “epistemo-critical preface” to *The Origin of German Mourning Drama*. I can sketch this development only in the greatest possible abbreviation here. In the dissertation, the Romantic fragment, as defined by Friedrich Schlegel, emerges as an intensive totality, one that could subsume vast, and vastly significant, realms of knowledge. In the essay on Goethe’s novel, Benjamin develops the notion of a “truth content” in texts, a notion bound to Goethe’s theory of the *Urphänomen*. And in the preface to the book on the *Trauerspiel*, he theorizes the notion of the *Ursprung*, or origin, as an image of “true nature” that leaps from the flux of history into that constellation Benjamin calls the “idea.”¹³

A key fragment from *The Arcades* attests to the ongoing importance of this idea complex for Benjamin’s theories of experience and knowledge under capitalism:

In studying Simmel’s presentation of Goethe’s concept of truth, I realized quite clearly that my concept of origin in the book on the *Trauerspiel* is a strict and compelling transfer of this first principle of Goethe’s from the realm of nature to that of history. Origins—the concept of the primal event, carried over from the pagan context of nature into the Jewish contexts of history. In the arcades project, I am dealing with an explanation of origins, too. That is to say, I pursue the origins of the forms and changes in the Paris arcades from their beginning to their decline, and grasp them through the economic facts. (*AP*, N,2a,4)

It is from this kernel that Benjamin will develop his theory of the dialectical image, to which he attributes a revelatory and revolutionary importance. The things that seem to be plucked from their context in the period and forced into an often uncomfortable proximity to other, seemingly unrelated objects and images hold an explosive charge in that they contain within themselves not only a diagram of their previous and projected development but also an image of an experience untainted by historical life under capitalism.

12. Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 1:37.

13. For a full discussion of this development, see Jennings, *Dialectical Images*, 125–38.

As I hope this all too brief constellation of Benjamin's ideas on things as objects of experience suggests, any important theory of experience in the late Benjamin that does not address the issue of the appropriate *objects* of experience is simply incomplete. It should thus come as no surprise that the book on Baudelaire argues with remarkable intensity that the structure of human experience in the mid-nineteenth century was, without exception, determined by the nature of its most prevalent object: the commodity. Benjamin had insisted very early on in his work on *The Arcades* that his understanding of commodity fetishism would play a determinative role in his project. In a letter to Adorno dated 12 December 1938, in which he attempts to save "The Paris of the Second Empire," and thus the Baudelaire book project as a whole, from rejection, he characterizes the central theoretical notion of part 3 of the book as "the empathy with the soul of the commodity."¹⁴ We can mark a three-year period—from the composition of the first Exposé of *The Arcades Project* in 1935 through the initial draft of the Baudelaire book and the completion of "The Paris of the Second Empire"—as a phase in Benjamin's career in which the commodity form played a central role in his theory of experience.

In his last phase, the one following the completion of "On Some Motifs," the category of phantasmagoria largely replaces the commodity as analytical tool. Adorno, in a letter dated 10 November 1938, defending the rejection of "The Paris of the Second Empire," had insisted that the absence of the category of phantasmagoria in that essay seriously compromises the work. It is perhaps not coincidental that, in the 1939 Exposé to *The Arcades*, Benjamin carefully delimits his use of the term *commodity*, identifying commodities largely with their role in the great world exhibitions; *phantasmagoria* largely replaces the former as the central category of the theory of experience. Compared to the specificity of Benjamin's analysis of the commodity in the Baudelaire book, the term *phantasmagoria* emerges here as a general theoretical concept more congenial to Adorno and Horkheimer, a term wholly free of the "facticity" for which they rejected Benjamin's first Baudelaire essay. As I hope to show in what follows, the notion of phantasmagoria is tied to notions of collective psychology, a position Benjamin increasingly came to associate with protofascist writers such as Ludwig Klages and Carl Jung.

In the Baudelaire book, Benjamin thus makes it abundantly clear that the objective conditions confronting experience under urban capitalism are

14. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Briefe*, 6:190.

not, in the first place, the urban crowd—which is, from the standpoint of experience, an optical device, an apparatus—but rather a pervasive structure formed by the mass production and dissemination of commodities. The key methodological term for the Baudelaire book is thus neither long experience nor isolated experience nor shock: It is the antinomy of the new and the eversame that inheres in commodities and their circulation and, by expressive extension, in the very nature of modern experience as repetition.

The primary vehicle of Benjamin's analysis of the commodity form and its effects is the *nouveauté*, or luxury good, in its relation to fashion. The *nouveauté* is the ideal exemplification of the antithetical qualities of the commodity in that it manifests not just its eversameness but especially its necessary semblance (*Schein*) of newness. These qualities are marshaled and disseminated on a mass basis by fashion, and it is in the analysis of fashion that Benjamin's critique becomes most corrosive. In one of the most often reworked sections of *The Arcades*—which would certainly have occupied a prominent position on the chapter on the *nouveauté*, and which was to be the first paragraph in one of the chapters of the Baudelaire book—Benjamin approximates the form of the *Denkbild*, or figure of thought, that had represented a key stylistic and philosophical form for Benjamin, starting with *One Way Street*.

Here fashion has opened the business of dialectical exchange between woman and ware—between carnal pleasure and the corpse. The clerk, death, tall and loutish, measures the century by the yard, plays the mannequin himself so as to save costs, and manages single-handedly the liquidation that in French is called *révolution*. For fashion was never anything other than the parody of the motley cadaver, provocation of death through woman, and bitter colloquy with decay whispered between shrill bursts of mechanical laughter. That is fashion. And that is why she changes so quickly; she titillates death and is already something different, something new, as he casts about to crush her. For a hundred years she holds her own against him. Now, finally, she is on the point of quitting the field. But he establishes on the banks of a new Lethe, which rolls its asphalt stream through arcades, the armature of the whores as trophy. (*AP*, B1,4)

Benjamin here marks fashion as the full realization of the anorganic and life-threatening aspects of the commodity. “To grasp the significance of *nouveauté* it is necessary to go back to novelty in everyday life. Why does everyone share the newest thing with everyone else? Presumably, to triumph over

the dead" (*AP*, D5a,5). Benjamin seldom offers so quotidian an example of his theory, but this tidbit suggests the full attraction of the semblance of novelty as well as its ability to delude us regarding its relation to death. Not just the prostitute, then, but, more generally, fashion itself has about it that often-cited sex appeal of the anorganic, an irrational force that pulls men and women down—in a kind of latter-day elective affinity—toward the elements and toward death. In this hollowed-out and lifeless world, even revolution is nothing more than one more violent rotation of the business cycle, another clearance sale in human meaning and life. "In that which is newest the face of the world never alters, this newest remains, in every respect, the same. This constitutes the eternity of hell" (*AP*, S1,5). And the way into hell leads through the arcades, which make a cameo appearance here as the stage on which a modern street becomes not just the site of seduction but the Lethe, where all reification is indeed a forgetting.

More scandalous than the attribution to fashion of a deathly lustrousness, though, is the central aesthetic claim of Benjamin's book: that Baudelaire's poetry does not merely *represent* commodification and consumption, does not merely name for the first time a new class of objects—a realization to which Théophile Gautier already came—but that this poetry is itself determined "bis auf den Grund" by the commodity form itself.

I'd like to offer a brief excursus here. Recent historians of nineteenth-century France, such as Michael Miller and Philip Nord, have repeatedly confirmed Benjamin's assertions in *The Arcades Project* that the era saw an astonishingly rapid increase in the production and circulation of commodities, in short, in consumption, locating this explosion in the shift from shops and mid-size stores to the *grands magasins*.¹⁵ Given the major changes that such a development brought with it, not only in the stores and in homes but, through advertising, to the street and public life, it is remarkable how seldom the features of the production, distribution, and consumption of commodities came to representation in culture. Historians love to adduce Émile Zola as evidence that these changes were registered and analyzed, but there is presumably a limit to the number of times that one novel, *Aux Bonheurs des Dames*, can be adduced as evidence, for that is the only significant literary representation of this complex. In painting, the situation is little different. T. J. Clark and others have looked at the paintings of the world exhibitions by Édouard Manet and the impressionists, and there has been some dis-

15. See Michael Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981); and Philip Nord, *Paris Shopkeepers and the Politics of Resentment* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986).

cussion of Edgar Degas's series at the milliner's shop, but here, too, there is a strikingly inverse relationship between the omnipresence of consumption as a social fact and its direct representation in art.¹⁶

Benjamin offers surprisingly clear, if scandalous and allegorical, justifications for just this absence of representation. Just as he argues that Baudelaire's impotence is the physiological manifestation of the bourgeois class's psychological discomfort at the thought of bringing children into the world they were creating, he also states directly that the ruling classes were compelled both to accelerate the production process and to suppress the fact of its existence, a suppression that limited its direct representation. The result is a coded, never thematic, but deeply formal relationship of art to its object.

In the chapter entitled "The Commodity," Benjamin makes of Marx his accomplice in the construction of a theory of refractory, commodity-determined art. He cites Marx to the effect that "value converts every product into a social hieroglyphic" (*AP*, X4,3); value wraps commodities in opaque veils and shields their nature and effects from straightforward experience. Benjamin insists—and this, and not the later attribution of a shock character, is the key move in his argument—that Baudelaire's poetry converts social hieroglyphics into art. "Around the middle of the century, the conditions of artistic production underwent a change. This change consisted of the fact that for the first time the form of the commodity imposed itself on the work of art. . . . Particularly vulnerable was . . . the lyric" (*AP*, J60,6). And in one of those montages of contemporary reactions of which Benjamin was a master, he claims in turn that the poems of the *Fleurs du mal* were produced under conditions determined by the mass production and circulation of commodities, and indeed were shaped by them: specialization, serialization, and the display typical of marketing. The result was an aesthetic form that shared and indeed intensified the essential features of the commodity. As Baudelaire himself put it in perhaps the best-known phrase from the Salon of 1859, a phrase that would have occupied a pivotal role in the chapter on the *nouveauté*, "Imagination decomposes all creation . . . it creates a new world, it creates the sensation of newness" (*AP*, J34a,1). If Baudelaire's sentence does not specifically address the relations between art and commodity, it is nonetheless remarkable for its anticipation of the commodity's primary effect.

Benjamin's analysis of the aesthetic role of the *Schein des Neuen*,

16. See especially T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (New York: Knopf, 1984).

the semblance of newness, is complex, and like nearly all the key conceptual nodes of *The Arcades*, it cuts two ways: The commodity form of art has both positive and negative implications, and is marked both by blindness and by insight. First, and most obviously, the appearance of newness is pernicious; it is the building block of phantasmagoria. In order to develop this argument, Benjamin draws in the chapter on the *nouveauté* on central categories of his early aesthetics, not so much to deploy them directly as to refunction them in light of his most recent thought. In a kind of potted natural history of *Schein*—that lustrous semblance that first emerged in Benjamin's thought in the early 1920s—Benjamin argues that the concept of semblance, originally derived from idealist aesthetics, is at base a natural category that has been usurped and overcome by the economics of the commodity. Nature had always been, Benjamin asserts here, as he had in the essay on the elective affinities, the privileged refuge of historical semblance. This notion has its origins in Benjamin's profound rejection of all things natural, an immanent disposition deepened and lent intellectual weight by his reading of Hermann Cohen. But in the nineteenth century, the deceptive, seductive appearance of nature has been trumped by the seductive luster of newness that inheres in the commodity form and, by extension from it, in the work of art. Works of art thus only replicate and disseminate historical semblance as parody and concentration of its effects. And semblance is not the only central aesthetic category in Benjamin's arsenal that undergoes a seismic shift due to its forced proximity to the commodity form: The very notion of aura is reconceived in the Baudelaire book in analogy to the commodity—it is now not so much the appearance of a distance, no matter how near it may seem, as the appearance of a seductive newness, however eversame the work may appear.

At the same time, Benjamin characterizes Baudelaire's wresting of the sensation of newness from the unchanging misery of the Second Empire as something positive and indeed even heroic. This argument is perhaps more tortuous and harder to work out than the negative argument I have outlined above. It starts from Benjamin's much discussed critique of the concept of progress, a critique that he finds limned already in Baudelaire. He attributes to Baudelaire, in fact, that central attestation of *The Arcades* as a whole: "The concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are 'status quo' is the catastrophe."¹⁷ Baudelaire was privy to a deep sense of the emptiness and stagnation of time. The mani-

17. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:583.

festation of this recognition is spleen, which Benjamin calls the feeling that corresponds to catastrophe in permanence. And spleen itself gives rise to a series of poems whose temporality Proust first noted as “a strange sectioning of time.”

The entirety of the first part of the Baudelaire book is given over to a presentation of the aesthetic device that corresponds to this splenetic disposition: allegory. If, in spleen, Baudelaire sought “to interrupt the course of the world,” then his weapon of preference was an allegory directed against “the harmonious facade of the world that surrounded him” (*AP*, J50,2; J55a,3). This ability to unmask the given order, with its illusion of totality and organic wholeness, is the progressive tendency of allegory (*AP*, J57,3).

In the concluding third section of the book, one line of this argument runs toward the role of allegory in the destruction of the aura, a road I will not pursue here. Another line leads past the examination of commodities in their singularity and toward the cumulative effect of networks of commodities, toward the notion of phantasmagoria. In one of the most astonishing moves in a corpus well known for its astonishing moves, Benjamin ties his analysis of phantasmagoria to the evocation of a trinitarian grouping that would have presided over the work as a whole, to Baudelaire, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Auguste Blanqui. What might have bound, in Benjamin’s imagination, these three figures from such disparate realms of endeavor? A preliminary answer begins with a glance at the role of the stars in the Baudelaire book.

Of the many allegorical elements of Baudelaire’s poetry accorded prominent positions in Benjamin’s analysis, pride of place must fall to the figuration of the stars. However, rather than fixing the stars in Baudelaire as the late Romantic markers of a visual prospect onto infinity and the absolute, Benjamin tears them back to earth, reduces their distance, by claiming that they, too, bear the marks of commodification. “The stars in Baudelaire are the rebus-image of the commodity; the eternal return of the same in great masses” (*AP*, J62,5). Here we have the first link, the scandalous claim that Baudelaire’s figuration of the stars is tied ideationally to that major idea complex in Nietzsche we know as the eternal return. This first use of the term *eternal return* launches Benjamin into the final stages of his argument. It has long been known that he privileges Baudelaire as the quintessential modern, but not because he somehow rises above his age. As Benjamin wrote to Gershom Scholem in 1938, he intended the Baudelaire book to show not how Baudelaire hovered above his contemporaries but rather how he lay *embedded* in the nineteenth century. The materiality of this figure is striking; Benjamin goes on to speak of the hollow impression left in the ground—

his text—when the stone that had been embedded—Baudelaire—is taken away. Baudelaire’s heroism consists in his willingness to allow the structure of modernity to be inscribed not just in his verse but on his body and, through his body, on the very ground. Baudelaire becomes, in another telling phrase, the secret agent of the destruction of his own class.

This newfound materiality, coupled with the explicitly martial rhetoric of the figure of the secret agent, provides the subtle linkage to the last figure of the trinity, Blanqui. Blanqui is that professional insurrectionist who had the distinction of being incarcerated for each major upheaval of the French nineteenth century: for the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, and finally for the Commune. It was in his last cell that he wrote the cosmological speculation *L'éternité par les astres* (Eternity for the stars), a text astonishing for its admixture of audacity and utter banality. Benjamin calls it theological “insofar as hell is a subject of theology.” “At the same time, it is the complement of the society to which Blanqui, in his old age, was forced to concede victory. . . . It is an unconditional surrender, but it is simultaneously the most terrible indictment of a society that projects this image of the cosmos—understood as an image of itself—across the heavens” (*AP*, D5a,6).

The central arguments of the Baudelaire book take their final shape, then, not through the analysis of popular culture and the built environment that would have characterized *The Arcades* but through a bifocal reading of a series of texts produced by a few great figures. The penultimate fragment in the final chapter of the book, “Tradition,” reads as follows:

The ideologies of the rulers are by their nature more changeable than the ideas of the oppressed. For not only must they, like the ideas of the latter, adapt each time to the situation of social conflict, but they must glorify that situation as fundamentally harmonious. . . . To undertake to “salvage” the great figures of the bourgeoisie means, not least, to conceive them in this most unstable dimension of their operation, and precisely from out of that to extract, to cite, what has remained inconspicuously buried beneath—being, as it was, of so little help to the powerful. To bring together Baudelaire and Blanqui means removing the bushel that is covering the light. (*AP*, J77,1)

The key phrase here is Benjamin’s interest in “the most unstable dimension of [the] operation” of these great bourgeoisie. The puzzling, aggravating assertion that would have organized the final chapters of the Baudelaire book runs as follows: Benjamin claims that, for all three of his key figures, this unstable dimension consists in the construction of *cosmological alle-*

gories. And these allegories—Baudelaire’s stars, Nietzsche’s eternal return, and Blanqui’s eternity by the stars—themselves reveal in a compelling manner the fissures and incoherencies in the harmonious facade created and maintained by capital.

The final pages of the Baudelaire book thus stage a series of productive, or progressive, phantasmagorias, if I may be allowed to stray into oxymoron. Baudelaire’s allegory of the stars makes of his poetry a conjuration of the phantasmagoria of modernity—with its main feature, the appearance of newness—from the misery of the Second Empire. It is progressive not as analysis or revelation but as a device that condenses and exacerbates central, if hidden, features of time as sameness and repetition. Similarly, Nietzsche’s idea of the eternal return conjures the “phantasmagoria of happiness of the Gründerjahre,” conjures, as Nietzsche would have it in *The Gay Science*, a human “favorably inclined to [himself] and to life, so as to long for nothing more ardently than for this last eternal sanctioning and sealing.”¹⁸ These phantasmagorias are the product of crisis but have the unusual ability to identify and intensify that crisis itself.

The idea of eternal recurrence transforms the historical event itself into a mass-produced article. But this conception also displays in another respect—on its reverse side, one could say—a trace of the economic circumstances to which it owes its sudden actuality. This was manifest at the moment when the security of conditions of life was considerably diminished through an accelerated succession of crises. The idea of eternal recurrence derived its luster from the fact that it was no longer possible, in all circumstances, to expect a recurrence of conditions across any interval of time shorter than that provided by eternity. The quotidian constellations quite gradually began to be less quotidian. Quite gradually their recurrence became a little less frequent, and there could arise in consequence the obscure presentiment that henceforth one must rest content with cosmic constellations. (*AP*, J62a,2)

This obscure presentiment corresponds to that most unstable dimension of bourgeois class operations: It produces productive phantasmagorias, phantasmagorias that acknowledge their commodity character yet point back to the actual conditions that produced them. As such they are a necessary

18. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), section 341.

prelude to the awakening from the bad dream of capitalism. An epoch does not simply awaken from the bad dream of history: It must have its uneasy sleep punctuated by a nightmare vision of a cruelty sufficient to awaken the dead. It is in this sense that Benjamin can characterize the buried man as “the transcendental subject of history” (*AP*, J57,5).

In the 1939 Exposé, Benjamin calls Blanqui’s book “one last cosmic phantasmagoria which implicitly comprehends the severest critique of all the others.” He ascribes to Blanqui’s text “an extreme hallucinatory power” (*AP*, 25). Blanqui’s phantasmagoria shows a society, or so Benjamin hoped, about to be nudged by this horror out of its long, phantasmagoric sleep and to awaken not—as had Benjamin’s allegorist at the end of the book on the *Trauerspiel*—in the redeemed world but in a world conscious of its own structures, mechanisms, and possibilities. Benjamin, of course, knew that this had not happened, that it might not happen on publication of his own major work, which is in no sense a progressive phantasmagoria—the study of the arcades. Yet he clung, against the intellectual fashion of his own age, to that hope granted only the hopeless. No one was more aware of the labyrinth of textuality; certainly no one with that awareness combined it with a greater hope that the world might change. At the risk of incurring the charge of nostalgia, though presumably not of fashionableness, I close with Benjamin’s own words: “In every true work of art there is a place where, for one who removes there, it blows cool like the wind of a coming dawn. From this it follows that art, which has often been considered refractory to every relation with progress, can provide its true definition. Progress is not based in the continuity of elapsing time but in its interferences: where the truly new makes itself felt for the first time with the sobriety of dawn” (*AP*, N9a,7). The experience of modernity theorized in Benjamin’s book on Baudelaire is, then, much more than a series of shocks to be parried and repressed. It is instead a complex model in which human experience is determined by the repetition and eversameness of the commodity form. The paradoxical hope of overcoming delusion, however intermittently, of attaining to a form of experience that might enable the recognition of truth, might reside precisely in those interferences—in Benjamin’s “progressive phantasmagorias.”

The Exterior as *Intérieur*: Benjamin's Optical Detective

Tom Gunning

Here is a riddle for you *unheimlicher* bird.

What is so strange it feels like home?

—Susan Mitchell, “Bird, a Memoir,” in *Erotikon: Poems*

Benjamin's arcades need to be grasped as a topographical fantasy, something like those phantom objects André Breton glimpsed in dreams that caused him to haunt the flea markets and arcades of Paris to find their equivalents—the “Cinderella Ashtray” or the “Nosferatu Necktie”—objects that, like a dream, combined seemingly irreconcilable aspects.¹ The arcade,

This essay has benefited greatly from a conversation at its origin with Thomas Elsaesser in a London restaurant and, just before its final revision, a long phone conversation with Miriam Hansen. I was also aided by comments at the conference “Benjamin Now: Critical Encounters with *The Arcades Project*” at Brown University and the comments of Philip Rosen. None of the above, however, should be assumed to be in agreement with my argument.

1. These oneiric objects are described in André Breton, *Communicating Vessels*, trans. Mary Ann Caws and Geoffrey T. Harris (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), 39–40; and in Breton, *Mad Love*, trans. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 32–37.

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Benjamin frequently reminds us, is an exterior space conceived as an *intérieur*. A one-line entry in *The Arcades Project* summons up topographical contradictions like a Möbius strip: "Arcades are houses or passages having no outside—like the dream."² By their very nature of enclosing an alleyway, or, rather, forcing a passage through a block of buildings, the arcades present a contradictory and ambiguous space that allows an interpenetration—not only of spaces, but of ways of inhabiting and using space. "More than anywhere else, the street reveals itself in the arcade as the furnished and familiar interior of the masses" (*AP*, d°,1). Thus the arcade embodies the fundamental dreamlike experience of the flaneur as the city "opens up to him as a landscape, even as it closes around him as a room" (*AP*, e°,1).

The exterior as interior becomes a crucial emblem for Benjamin's analysis of the nineteenth century, because this ambiguous spatial interpenetration responds to an essential division on which the experience of the bourgeois society is founded, the creation of the interior as a radical separation from the exterior, as a home in which the bourgeois can dwell and dream undisturbed by the noise, activity, and threats of the street, the space of the masses and of production, a private individual divorced from the community. A cocoon of consumption, the *intérieur* becomes "not just the universe of the private individual; it is also his *etui*" (*AP*, 20). Encased within an upholstered environment, the inhabitant of the *intérieur* is cushioned, like the railway passenger for whose comfort Wolfgang Schivelbusch claims the modern shock-absorbing techniques of upholstered furniture were first designed.³ But what collision is being warded off by such protection? This new interior betrays signs of the previous violence of demarcation by which the *intérieur* and its privileges were claimed—as Benjamin observes, pieces of furniture retain the characteristics of fortifications (*AP*, 214–15). The "unconscious retention of a posture of struggle and defense" (*AP*, 12,3) that Benjamin quotes Adolf Behne as finding in the bourgeois furniture arrangement belies any taking for granted the success of this exclusion. In spite of attempts to fashion an impermeable cloistered space, a summons from without, Benjamin claims, such as an insistently ringing doorbell, cannot be exorcised simply by being ignored (*AP*, 11a,4).

Through a defensive posture, the *intérieur* constitutes itself as a

2. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), L1a,1. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *AP* and by convolute.

3. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Anselm Hollo (New York: Urizen Press, 1977), 123–25.

space cut off from the world, but this process of private appropriation relies not only on separation and insulation but also on disguise and illusion, as the optics of interior space take on the complexity of the phantasmagoria. As Benjamin says, "The space disguises itself" (*AP*, 12,6). Ultimately the interior cannot withstand the exterior; it can only transform the nature of its looming invasion optically. While the aural summons of the ringing doorbell may not be successfully ignored, the inhabitant of the interior can still optically dominate the exterior through a "window mirror," a device Theodor Adorno describes as "a characteristic furnishing of the spacious nineteenth-century apartment." A carefully positioned mirror, also known as "a spy," it reflects who, or what, waits outside (Figure 1). As an optical device of the *intérieur*, the window mirror, in Adorno's words, allows the exterior to enter the room "only [as] the semblance of things."⁴ This control of semblance defines the *intérieur* as much as does the defensively conceived furniture. Through semblance, Benjamin claims, the interior can pretend to be a space of universal representation: "In the interior [the private individual] brings together remote locales and memories of the past. His living room is a box in the theater of the world" (*AP*, 19). Thus the nineteenth-century parlor became not only the protective shell one fashions for oneself (*AP*, 221) but also the locus of optical devices and philosophical toys of all sorts—the stereoscope, the kaleidoscope, the magic lantern—that seem to open the viewer's gaze onto a different world, but only under the dominion of the image and semblance.

But optical transformation of the interior could cause, rather than assuage, anxiety, figuring a return of the repressed. Benjamin returns frequently to the opening pages of Proust's *Swann's Way*, invoking the relation the process of dreaming and awakening bears to the *intérieur*, as Marcel, on awakening, would try to reconstruct both the structure of his own body and the shape and arrangement of the furniture in his bedroom.⁵ A few pages on, in a passage Benjamin does not refer to directly but that introduces the theme of the optical uncertainty of the *intérieur*, Proust describes the attempt by family members to ease Marcel's fear of slipping into sleep with an optical device, the parlor magic lantern:

It substituted for the opaqueness of my walls an impalpable iridescence, supernatural phenomenon of many colors, in which legends were depicted as on a shifting and transitory window. But my sor-

4. Theodor W. Adorno, *Kierkegaard: The Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 42.

5. See *AP*, 388–89, 464, 844, and 912.



Figure 1. A “window mirror” or “spy” (frame enlargement from the German film *Das Recht auf Dasein*, 1913).

rows were only increased thereby, because this mere change of lighting was enough to destroy the familiar impression I had of my room, thanks to which, save for the torture of going to bed, it had become quite endurable. Now I no longer recognized it, and felt uneasy in it, as in a room in some hotel or chalet, in a place where I had just arrived by train for the first time. . . .

I cannot express the discomfort I felt at this intrusion of mystery and beauty into a room which I had succeeded in filling with my own personality until I thought no more of it than of myself. The anaesthetic effect of habit being destroyed, I would begin to think—and to feel—such melancholy things.⁶

The encasing forms of the bourgeois interior, its protective shell, are literally shaped by habit (*AP*, 14,5). The plush material that swaddles the bourgeois not only cushions its inhabitants but, of all materials, most retains

6. Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff, in *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 10–11.

the imprint of their habits. The furnishings of the *intérieur* become molded (as Marcel fantasizes as he awakes) to the very shape of his body and bear the imprint of his deeds. As Benjamin puts it in his essay “Experience and Poverty,” in the bourgeois room of the 1880s, “there is no spot on which the owner has not left his mark. . . . [A]nd conversely, the *intérieur* forces the inhabitant to adopt the greatest number of habits—habits that do more justice to the interior he is living in than to himself.”⁷ Benjamin contrasts this with the new environments of glass and metal being built by Le Corbusier, Adolf Loos, and the Bauhaus, and imagined by Paul Scheerbarth—the glasses houses that so fascinated both Benjamin and Sergei Eisenstein, “rooms in which it is hard to leave traces” (*SW*, 2:734).

Imprinted in the velour and plush of the *intérieur*, Benjamin locates “the origin of the detective story, which inquires into these traces and follows these tracks” (*AP*, 20). One might find this claim somewhat surprising, given Benjamin’s frequent claim that the detective is the heir of the flaneur, taking over the persona of the former’s street-wandering idleness as a cover for his sharp-eyed surveillance, whether in the street or in the new department stores that, like the arcade, move the human circulation of the street into the confines of a building.⁸ Benjamin’s analysis of Poe’s “The Man of the Crowd” sketches out this transformation from flaneur to detective when the narrator leaves his position at the plate-glass window from which he surveyed the passing urban crowd in order to surreptitiously follow one of its members whose appearance has aroused his suspicion.⁹

In spite of occasional nocturnal rambles, Poe’s most famous detective, C. Auguste Dupin, confined within his shuttered daytime apartment, remains very much a man of the *intérieur*, for his most famous cases, the murder in the Rue Morgue and the purloined letter, depend on his careful consideration of the arrangement of furniture and objects in interiors. However, our consideration of Benjamin’s topography should have revealed to us that the opposition between street and *intérieur* does not form a simple dichotomy; the significance of the arcade lies partly in its simultaneous

7. Walter Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty,” trans. Rodney Livingstone, in *Selected Writings*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996–), 2:734. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *SW*.

8. Walter Benjamin, “Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire,” in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso Editions, 1983), 69; also *AP*, M13a,2.

9. Benjamin, “Paris of the Second Empire,” 48–54. See, as well, my discussion of this in my essay, “From Kaleidoscope to X-Ray: Urban Spectatorship, Poe, Benjamin and *Traffic in Souls* (1913),” *Wide Angle* 19, no. 4 (1999): 25–63.

embodiment of both aspects of this apparent contradiction. A dialectical development of this spatial contradiction must unfold through its optics: both the close-up scrutiny of the detective and a disorienting process of reflection.

The Angle of View: The Optics of Detective Work

Interpenetration as principle in film, in new architecture, in colportage.

—Walter Benjamin, *AP*, O°, 10

Benjamin quotes H. Pene's 1859 reaction to police solving a London murder through examination of a piece of clothing: "So many things in an overcoat!—when circumstances and men make it speak" (*AP*, I5a,2) (Figure 2). The methods of Émile Gaboriau's *Monsieur LeCoq* and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* are figured here. The traces left in personal belongings, which detectives examine, take the form of incriminating clues. Impressions of the human personality and its deeds become absorbed without one's awareness by the nearly animate objects of the *intérieur* and eventually betray the owner or user. But Carlo Ginsburg has already beautifully examined this aspect of the scrutiny of the trace as the origin of detective fiction, and I see no need to rehearse it further here.¹⁰ Rather, I want to follow Benjamin's lead and locate the dynamics of the detective story not only in the scrutiny of clues but in the optical exchange between interior and exterior. The optics of the detective has primarily been investigated in terms of Foucauldian panoptics of surveillance, an essential aspect I grant, but one that Benjamin's analysis of optics complicates. Commenting on *Panoptikum* as a popular name for wax museums at the turn of the century, Benjamin glosses it in a typically dialectical manner that goes beyond Jeremy Bentham and Michel Foucault: "Panopticon: not only does one see everything, but one sees it in all ways" (*AP*, Q2,8). The nineteenth-century detective not only observes and investigates but also—at least potentially—investigates his or her point of view.

Benjamin's optics relates to a tradition deriving from Marx's rhetorical use of optical devices such as the camera obscura and the phantasmagoria to describe the illusory nature of relations and appearance under

10. Carlo Ginsburg, "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm," in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 96–125.

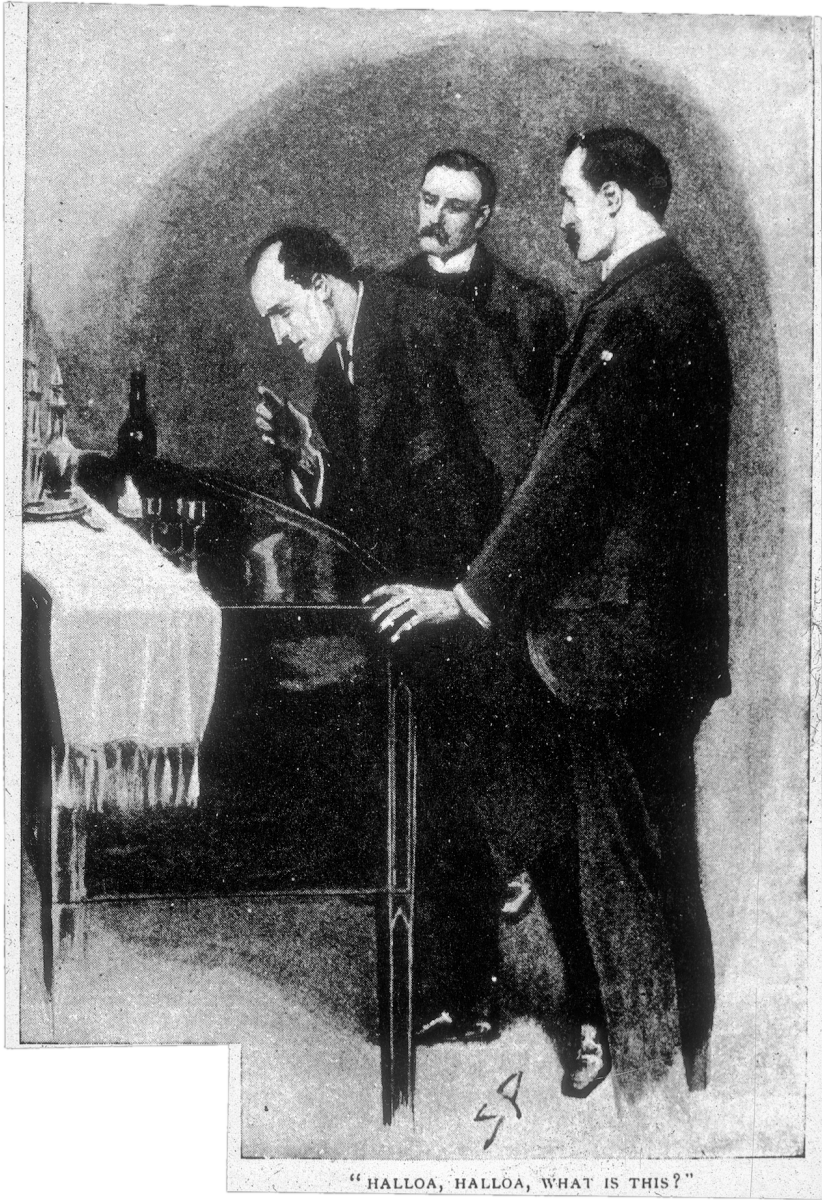


Figure 2. Sherlock Holmes examines the furniture of a bourgeois *intérieur*. From *The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes* (Edison, N.J.: Castle Books, 1976), 5; reprint of original *Strand* magazine Sherlock Holmes tales, no copyright claimed.

capitalism and its ideologies, a tradition developed, as well, by Benjamin's friends, Adorno (whose Marxian definition of the phantasmagoria Benjamin quotes as "a consumer item in which there is no longer anything that is supposed to remind us of how it came into being" [AP, X13a]) and Bertolt Brecht (especially in the last scene of *Galileo*, in which superstition and religion are reduced to optical phenomena when the shadow cast on a wall that appears to a child as a witch at her cauldron is shown to be simply an old woman cooking when he is hoisted up to look into the interior through a window).¹¹ Likewise, Adorno's account of the window mirror sees the exterior as penetrating into the *intérieur* only by passing through an optical transformation into semblance, that is, illusion. But Benjamin also dialectically develops this tradition by understanding optical devices (including the cinema) as not simply deceiving or creating illusion but as articulating the dialectic of interior/exterior, the relation between the private dreaming self and the public space of production and history. In his analysis of popular literature (colportage, such as detective stories), Benjamin reveals the access that optical devices and entertainment may provide to unconscious adumbrations of revolutionary perception.

In two different entries in *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin speaks quite gnominically of the truth exemplified by what he calls "the house without windows." Thus, in one of his first sketches:

The true has no windows. Nowhere does the true look out to the universe. And the interest in the panoramas is in seeing the true city. "The city in a bottle"—the city indoors. What is found within the *windowless* house is the true. One such windowless house is the theater; hence the eternal pleasure it affords. Hence, also, the pleasure taken in those windowless rotundas, the panoramas. In the theater, after the beginning of the performance, the doors remain closed. Those passing through arcades are, in a certain sense, the inhabitants of a panorama. The windows of this house open out onto them. They can be seen out these windows but cannot themselves look in. (AP, F°,24)

This note is nearly reproduced in *Convolute Q*, slightly edited and rearranged, with the rather difficult last sentences perhaps clarified as, "The windows that look down on it [the arcade] are like loges from which one can

11. This culminating scene appears in scene 14 of the Charles Laughton translation, Bertolt Brecht, *Collected Plays*, vol. 5, ed. Ralph Mannheim and John Willett (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 465–67.

gaze into its interior, but one cannot see out these windows to anything outside" (AP, Q2a,7). I would be the first to confess I find these statements more intriguing than obvious. I am speculating that the "true" invoked here is not ironic (possibly a dangerous assumption). But I believe it allows us to keep the dialectic of optics in play, liberating it from a simple opposition of truth/illusion. It seems certain that Benjamin here refers to a statement by Leibniz in the "Monadology": "Monads have no windows, through which anything could come in or go out."¹² Yet the relation between the self-enclosed monad and the permeable arcades remains rather obscure to me. What seems to be at issue, however, is a truth that depends not on looking out at the world, on simple accuracy of representation, but rather on a system of representation coming through the interconnection of all created things, which makes a monad, in Leibniz's words: "a perpetual living mirror of the universe."¹³ The nature of the "true," "of the living mirror" within the windowless room, will be one of "the MacGuffins" of the optical detective story I am about to spin.¹⁴

An entry in *One Way Street*, entitled "Manorially Furnished Ten-Room Apartment," presents the detective story as a critique of the *intérieur*:

The furniture style of the second half of the nineteenth century has received its only adequate description, and analysis, in a certain type of detective novel at the dynamic center of which stands the horror of apartments. The arrangement of the furniture is at the same time the site plan of deadly traps, and the suite of rooms prescribes the path of the fleeing victims. . . . This character of the bourgeois apartment, tremulously awaiting the nameless murderer like a lascivious old lady her gallant, has been penetrated by a number of authors who, as writers of "detective stories"—and perhaps also because in their works part of the bourgeois pandemonium is exhibited—have been denied the reputation they deserve. The quality in question has been captured in isolated writings by Conan Doyle and in a major work by A. K. Green. And with *The Phantom of the Opera*, one of the great novels about the nineteenth century, Gaston Leroux has brought the genre to its apotheosis. (SW, 1:447)

12. G. W. Leibniz, "Monadology," in *Philosophical Texts*, trans. and ed. R. S. Woolhouse and Richard Francks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 268.

13. Leibniz, "Monadology," 275.

14. *MacGuffin* is the term Alfred Hitchcock used to describe the pretext or device of a mystery text, the thing that the detectives are searching for. He explains the term in an interview in Francois Truffaut, *Hitchcock* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), 98.

In addition to the familiar citing of Poe and Conan Doyle, Benjamin speaks here of two writers of detective fiction, neither of whom is as well known today as they deserve to be: Anna Katharine Green and Gaston Leroux. Leroux has regained some attention in the last decades due to the Broadway adaptation of his most famous work. Green remains out of print and largely ignored, except for a few feminist literary critics and historians of the genre who recognize that this American woman writer was a best-selling author of detective novels decades before Conan Doyle.¹⁵ Green is undoubtedly the most important figure in nineteenth-century detective fiction between Poe and Gaboriau.¹⁶

In contrast to the hard-boiled film noir detective who roams the mean streets of the city, the detectives created by Green and Leroux remain primarily inhabitants of the interior. *The Phantom of the Opera* revolves around one of the greatest architectural fantasias in modern literature, adapting the gothic castle with its crypts and secret passageways to a modern structure in an urban location, the Paris Opéra, designed by Charles Garnier. As a temple of illusion and display, “the stage on which imperial Paris could gaze at itself with satisfaction” (*AP*, L2a,5), as Benjamin quotes one historian as saying, the Opéra included not only the famous area of visual display—the grand stairway and theater—but layer upon layer of subterranean levels in which props, sets, and even horse stables were housed, depths that allowed the illusions created on the surface to operate. The construction of the Opéra took over a decade (1861–75), beginning under the Empire and finishing in the Republic, including the period of the Prussian siege and the Commune. In its depth, at least according to Leroux, the structure retained signs of this repressed recent history, as well as of the primal geology of Paris, incarnating another of the subterranean realms of Paris, like the sewers explored by Hugo and Nadar, which fascinated Benjamin as well. The lowest level of the Opéra sinks into a lake, the center of which the phantom Erik has made his unrestricted domain. But it is through its many passageways, including the one formerly used by the communards, known as the “Communist way,” that Erik exerts his influence throughout the Opéra, as the seemingly invisible “spirit of music.” In the center of Erik’s sub-

15. See, for instance, the insightful treatment of Green by Catherine Ross Nickerson, in *The Web of Iniquity: Early Detective Fiction by American Women* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 59–116.

16. This is the conclusion of traditional historians of the detective story, as well, such as A. E. Murch, *The Development of the Detective Novel* (London: Peter Owen, 1958), 158–64.

terranean dwelling lies another architectural fantasy in which the structural meets the optical, a hexagonal torture room composed of mirrors in which illusions are conjured and multiplied to infinity and in which Erik's victims are driven mad by a succession of illusory scenes combined with oppressive heat and thirst.

Leroux's inspiration for these fiendish optics was avowedly the Salle du Illusions, a central attraction of the 1900 World's Exposition in Paris, which the narrator claims Erik had originally invented in Persia to entertain a sultan.¹⁷ As an actual commercial attraction, its illusion was provided with a guaranteed exit, rather than subjecting customers to the nightmare of being lost in infinity, which drives Leroux's characters mad. This attraction was later transported to the Parisian wax museum, the Musée Grévin in the Passage Joffroy (where it remains to this day), and rebaptized as the Cabinet des Mirages (Figure 3). Benjamin recognized it as an essential *topos* in his discussion of the arcades:

Here were united, one final time, iron-supporting beams and giant glass panes intersecting at countless angles. Various coverings make it possible to transform these beams into Greek columns one moment, Egyptian pilasters the next, then into street lamps; and according as they come into view the spectator is surrounded with unending forests of Greco-Roman temple columns, with suites, as it were, of innumerable railway stations, market halls, or arcades, one succeeding another. (*AP*, R1,8)

The bell whose sound announced each change recalled for Benjamin the Kaiserpanorama of his childhood, in which a similar bell would sound as, "before our eyes, that were full of the pain of departure, an image would slowly disengage from the stereoscope, allowing the next one to appear" (*AP*, R1,8).

The optics of this attraction, another windowless house, literally revolves around a key figure in Benjamin's optics of the arcade: the mirror, which forms the subject of *Convolute R*. For Benjamin, unlike most Romantics and psychoanalysts, mirrors do not primarily serve as the means of self-reflection and reproduction but provide another instance of the optically created dialectic of interior and exterior: "The way mirrors bring the open expanse, the streets, into the café—this too, belongs to the interweaving of spaces, to the spectacle by which the flaneur is ineluctably drawn. . . .

17. Gaston Leroux, *The Phantom of the Opera* (London: W. H. Allen, 1985), 225, 259–60.

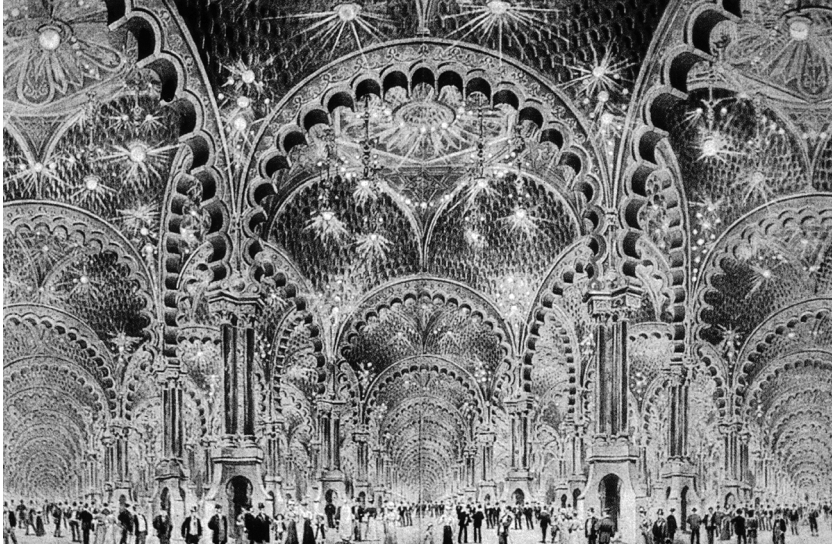


Figure 3. The Salle des Illusions with its arches multiplied to infinity through mirrors; pages 9–10 of exposition guidebook in author's collection.

[W]here doors and walls are made of mirrors, there is no telling outside from in, with all the equivocal illumination. Paris is the city of mirrors" (*AP*, R1,1; R1,3). Benjamin was well aware of both the attraction and the danger of these illusory spaces, so vividly envisioned in the torture chamber in the climax of Leroux's work. "Let two mirrors reflect each other; then Satan plays his favorite trick and opens here in his way (as his partner does in lovers' gazes) the perspective on infinity" (*AP*, R1,6). The satanic multiplication of perspectives risks losing all track of its original dialectic and seems to open space to endless elusive attempts at mastery (as it does in Erik's torture chamber, and—Benjamin indicates—in the broad perspective of Haussmann's panoptical construction of Paris). For the truth contained in these windowless houses lies in their hollow core. Benjamin's evocative analysis recalls both the Cabinet des Mirages and Erik's sinister tortures: "For although this mirror world may have many aspects, indeed infinitely many, it remains ambiguous, double edged. It blinks: it is always this one—and never nothing—out of which another immediately arises. The space that transforms itself does so in the bosom of nothingness" (*AP*, R2a,3). It is this pivot on nothingness that the Cabinet des Mirages reveals, the optical

process of reproduction in which nothing is produced—except our sense of nothingness.¹⁸

But if Leroux's Erik expresses his villainy through his mastery of illusions, conjuring an infinite landscape within a small chamber, can this trick also be worked within the bourgeois parlor? Erik's glass-covered room would seem to recall the unyielding spaces of modernity rather than the plush- and velvet-furnished domain of the *intérieur*. Leroux himself underlines the contrast by having Raoul de Chagny, the novel's romantic hero, regain consciousness within the bourgeois *intérieur* Erik has created as his own dwelling within his subterranean realm. As with Proust, Raoul's awakening is one of disorientation and gradual recognition guided by the typical outlay of middle-class furniture:

After the deceptions and illusion of the torture chamber, the precision of the middle-class details in that quiet little room seemed invented for the express purpose of once more puzzling the mind of the mortal rash enough to stray into that abode of living nightmare. The wooden bedstead, the beeswaxed mahogany chairs, the chest of drawers, the brasses, the little square antimacassars carefully placed on the backs of the chairs, the clock on the mantelpiece and the harmless looking ebony caskets at either end . . . and lastly the what-not filled with shells, with red pin cushions, with mother of pearl boats and an enormous ostrich egg . . . the whole discreetly lighted by a shaded lamp standing on a small round table: this collection of ugly, peaceful, reasonable furniture, *at the bottom of the Opera cellars*, bewildered the imagination more than all the late fantastic happenings.¹⁹

Raoul here discovers a secret convergence between the overstuffed bourgeois interior and the seemingly deserted optical illusions of the mirrored torture chamber. In this intersection of seeming opposites, Leroux inscribes and also deconstructs the horror of the *intérieur* Benjamin claims as his true subject, the product of a detour into the optically absurd.

18. Miriam Hansen has pointed out to me the resonance that this discussion of mirrors has with Siegfried Kracauer's essay "Photography." One might recall, in particular, the phrase "Nothing of these contains us and the photograph gathers fragments around a nothing," in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. and ed. Thomas Y. Levin (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), 56. Again, this raises the issues of the optics of modernity.

19. Leroux, *Phantom*, 246; emphasis in original.

While Poe may have pointed the way, Green, as Catherine Ross Nickerson's recent treatment of early detective fiction by American women shows, supplied a gendered sense of the domestic and its discontents that allowed the detective story to attain to the novelistic. For Dupin and his legacy of sleuths, a crime leaves its imprint in an object, a thing whose handling and use have converted it into a hieroglyphic of crime, a bearer of signs to be deciphered and read. The optical domain of detective fiction may originate in the masterful detective's gaze, but it has other visual regimes that often deflect the direct gaze into a mediated course of reading and reflecting.

As a genre, the nineteenth-century detective story seems often to aspire to a form of hieroglyphic writing, straddling both arbitrary and pictorial modes of signification, through its visual presentation of the text to the reader, such as its frequent use of diagrams and visual facsimiles. Readers of Sherlock Holmes might not know the illustrations that accompanied the original publications of the Holmes stories in the *Strand* magazine, which are not considered an essential part of the text, but they must recall the various diagrams and maps that appear embedded in the narrative as well as the printed text (Figure 4). These include messages that are literally hieroglyphic, such as the cavorting cryptogram that capers through "The Adventure of the Dancing Men," or the torn or damaged written messages whose fragmentary nature is reproduced, forbidding any reading of it as a nonmaterial sign but rather demanding it be examined as a very material signifier, whose matching with a signified has been blocked (Figure 5).²⁰ Semiotically, this disjunction and later reunion might define the genre, for Holmes's solutions relieve material objects of their embarrassing obtuseness as they are cannily read by the knowing detective.

Although no responsible historian takes claims of invention too seriously, Green is often credited as the originator of these typographical devices. Her first novel, *The Leavenworth Case* (1878), provided diagrams of both the scene of the crime and of a later location, as well as the reproduction of a fragmentary letter whose lacunae the detective must fill in and read

20. Examples can be found in Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Reigate Puzzle," in *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1930), 401, 410; "The Naval Treaty," 451; "The Adventure of the Dancing Men," 512, 515, 516, 526; "The Adventure of the Priory School," 545; "The Adventure of the Golden Pince-Nez," 610; and "The Adventure of the Missing Three-Quarter," 625–26. The original *Strand* illustrations by Sidney Paget are reproduced in *The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes* (Edison, N.J.: Castle Books, 1976).

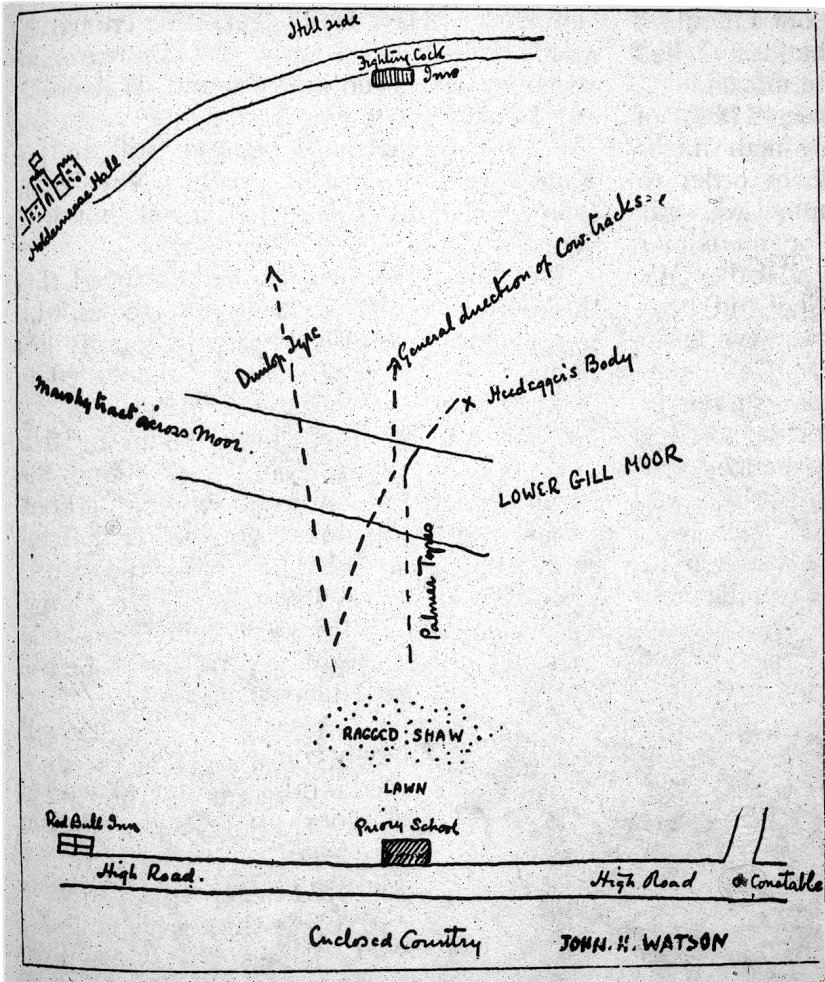


Figure 4. Diagram drawn by Holmes (note the location of Heidegger's body!). From *The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes* (Edison, N.J.: Castle Books, 1976), 125; reprint of original *Strand* magazine Sherlock Holmes tales, no copyright claimed.



"HOLMES HELD UP THE PAPER."

I looked with amazement at the absurd hieroglyphics upon the paper.

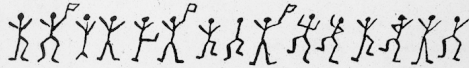
"Why, Holmes, it is a child's drawing," I cried.

"Oh, that's your idea!"

"What else should it be?"

"That is what Mr. Hilton Cubitt, of Riding Thorpe Manor, Norfolk, is very anxious to know. This little conundrum came by the first post, and he was to follow by the next train. There's a ring at the bell, Watson. I should not be very much surprised if this were he."

A heavy step was heard upon the stairs, and an instant later there entered a tall, ruddy, clean-shaven gentleman, whose clear eyes and florid cheeks told of a life led far from the fogs of Baker Street. He seemed to bring a whiff of his strong, fresh, bracing, east-coast air with him as he entered. Having shaken hands with each of us, he was about to sit down when his eye rested upon the paper with the curious markings,



which I had just examined and left upon the table.

"Well, Mr. Holmes, what do you make of these?" he cried. "They told me that you were fond of queer mysteries, and I don't think you can find a queerer one than that. I sent the paper on ahead so that you might have time to study it before I came."

"It is certainly rather a curious production," said Holmes. "At first sight it would appear to be some childish prank. It consists of a number of absurd little figures dancing across the paper upon which they are drawn. Why should you attribute any importance to so grotesque an object?"

"I never should, Mr. Holmes. But my wife does. It is frightening her to death. She says nothing, but I can see terror in her eyes. That's why I want to sift the matter to the bottom."

Holmes held up the paper so that the sunlight shone full upon it. It was a page torn from a note-book. The markings were done in pencil, and ran in this way:—

Holmes examined it for some time, and then, folding it carefully up, he placed it in his pocket-book.

"This promises to be a most interesting and unusual case," said he. "You gave me a few particulars in your letter, Mr. Hilton Cubitt, but I should be very much obliged if you would kindly go over it all again for the benefit of my friend, Dr. Watson."

"I'm not much of a story-teller," said our

Figure 5. A page from the original publication of "The Adventure of the Dancing Men." From *The Original Illustrated Sherlock Holmes* (Edison, N.J.: Castle Books, 1976); reprint of original *Strand* magazine Sherlock Holmes tales, no copyright claimed.

correctly (Figure 6).²¹ Apparently in the original edition of this novel these letter fragments were not illustrations but actual irregular pieces of paper bound into the book.²² Similar diagrams appear in the novels of Leroux's most famous detective Rouletabille, *The Mystery of the Yellow Room*, one of the most famous locked-door mysteries, and *The Perfume of the Lady in Black*, perhaps the most satisfying Oedipal mystery of the early twentieth century.²³ Such diagrams function differently from the maps in which turn-of-the-century authors try to locate fictional events, in either a naturalist (as in Thomas Hardy's maps of Wessex) or fantastic genre (as in L. Frank Baum's maps of Oz and its surrounding territories). In contrast, these diagrams map out domestic spaces—of interiors—that have become as threatening as a jungle. They indicate the possibility (or impossibility) of passage, the routes of escape, and even the trajectory of a gunshot. As Benjamin puts it, Leroux and Green transform the bourgeois interior into pandemonium, and these diagrams lay out its threats and dangers.

But while these diagrams are clearly visual and seem to illustrate the systemic and panoptic view of a detective, sailing above the scene and witnessing it from a cartographer's point of view, do they express the complex dialectical optics, the transforming pivot between exterior and *intérieur*, that I have claimed Benjamin found in the detective story? Beyond these topographical diagrams that are so common in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century detective stories that they could be considered as much *topoi* of the genre as the locked room or the dinner party, there also occur—not as frequently, but therefore with more startling force—scenes in which complex optical situations reveal the entrance of the criminal into the midst of apparent bourgeois order. The optical acuity and ambiguity captured in the primal scene from Green's novel *The Woman in the Alcove* (1906) is worth detailing.

The novel's protagonist, an eventual amateur detective seeking to clear her fiancé's name, is the plain and slightly shy Rita van Arsdale. At a large dinner party, while seating herself at the table, she experiences a strange episode:

I had not moved nor had I shifted my gaze from the scene before me—the ordinary scene of a gay and well-filled supper-room, yet I

21. Anna Katharine Green, *The Leavenworth Case* (New York: Dover Publications, 1981), 6, 166–67, 210, 220.

22. Nickerson, *Web*, 77.

23. Gaston Leroux, *The Mystery of the Yellow Room* (New York: Dover Publications, 1977), 32, 90; *The Perfume of the Lady in Black* (Sawry: Dedalus, 1998), 56, 59.

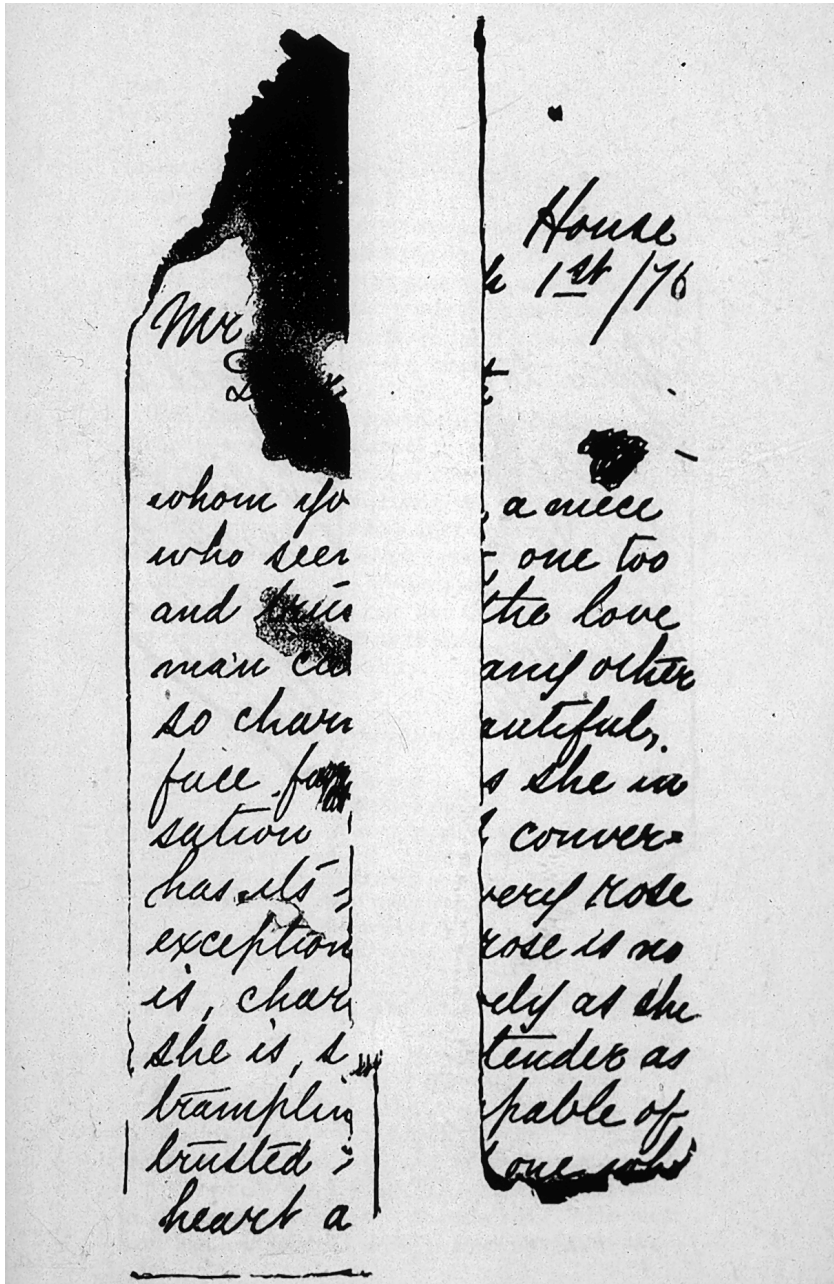


Figure 6. Fragment of letter published in Anna Katharine Green's *The Leavenworth Case*. From Anna Katharine Green, *The Leavenworth Case* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1878), 13.

found myself looking, as if through a mist I had not even seen develop, at something as strange, unusual and remote as any phantasm, yet distinct enough in its outlines for me to get a decided impression of a square of light surrounding the figure of a man in a peculiar pose not easily described. It all passed in an instant, and I sat staring at the window opposite me with the feeling of one who has just seen a vision.²⁴

Immediately after this experience, which seems to waver between the supernatural and the pathological, the dinner party is interrupted by the announcement that a woman, Mrs. Fairbrother, who was wearing a large and famous diamond, has been found murdered in an alcove off the dining room, her diamond missing. Rita's fiancé, Anson Durand, is suspected of committing the murder, for he was last seen with the victim. Even more damning, the diamond is actually discovered on Rita's person in a pair of gloves Anson had handed to her.

During interrogation by a police detective, everything seems to incriminate her lover and perhaps even herself. Realizing she has no "witness" to her probity, Rita suddenly recalls her vision:

Instantly (and who can account for such phenomena?) there floated into view before my retina a reproduction of the picture I had seen, or imagined myself to have seen, in the supper room; and at that time it had opened before me an unknown vista quite removed from the surrounding scene, so it did now, and I beheld again in faint outlines, and yet with an effect of complete distinctness, a square of light through which appeared an open passage partly shut off from view by a half lifted curtain and the tall figure of a man holding back this curtain and gazing, or seeming to gaze, at his own breast, on which he had already laid one quivering finger. (*WA*, 54)

In this second manifestation, the vision is fully psychologized as a memory, its sudden floating into visibility clearly an act of recall. But curiously, this "reproduction" of the vision is more distinct, or described more fully. Details both of its background (an open passage half concealed by curtains) and of the man's curious gesture and stance (gazing at his breast, which he touches with his finger) are now recounted.

With this increased clarity come further realizations: "Feeling anew

24. Anna Katharine Green, *The Woman in the Alcove* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1906), 19. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *WA*.

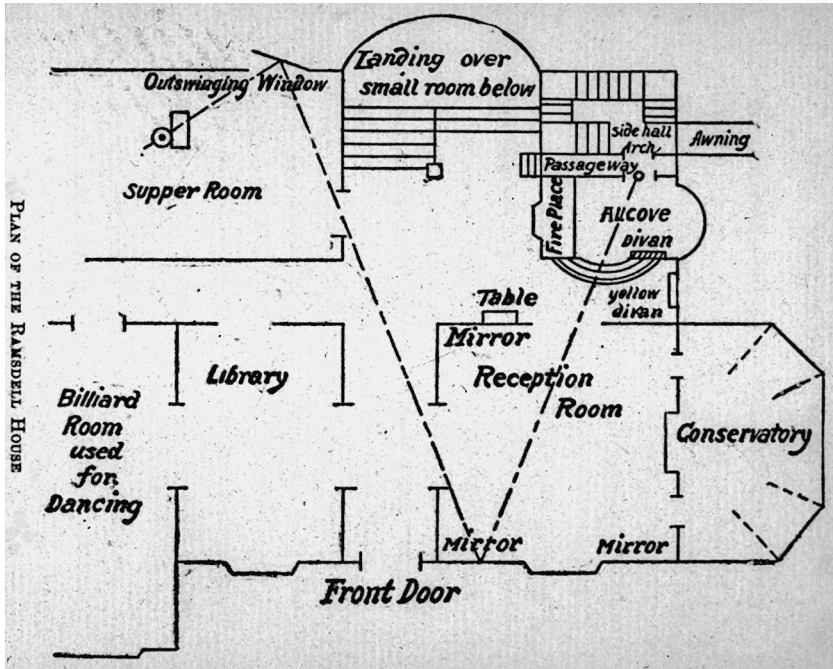


Figure 7. Diagram from Green's *The Woman in the Alcove* of Rita Van Arsdale's vision. From Anna Katharine Green, *The Woman in the Alcove* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1906), 15.

the vague sensation of shock and expectation which seemed its natural accompaniment, I became conscious of a sudden conviction that the picture which had opened before me in the supper-room was the result of a reflection in a glass or mirror of something then going on in a place not otherwise within the reach of my vision; a reflection, the importance of which I suddenly realized when I recalled at what a critical moment it had occurred" (WA, 54–55). Convinced that she had seen the murderer of Mrs. Fairbrother, Rita persuades the police to let her return to the dining room. Resuming her seat at the table, Rita discovers that a large window facing her across the table could be swung on a pivot. The police manipulate this window until Rita declares, "For the second time I was to receive the impression of a place now indelibly imprinted on my consciousness" (WA, 62). However, the vision she saw was not a simple reflection, but rather a reflection of a reflection, the window bouncing to Rita's retina an image it caught from a mirror, reflecting in turn the very alcove in which the murder took place. The novel

includes a diagram of the house on the eve of the dinner party and the murder (Figure 7). But this is more than a plan produced from the abstracted viewpoint of cartography; it also traces with a broken line the ricocheting glance by which Rita catches sight of the murderer. What we see here is not simply the panoptic gaze of the detective but the contingent flash of insight.

If less elaborate and less revolutionary in implication than this glimpse offered by the female protagonist of a female author, a similar relayed view occurs in Leroux's *The Perfume of the Woman in Black*. The major female character (revealed at the end to be the long lost mother of the detective Rouletabille), Mme. Mathilde Darzac, lives in fear that her ex-husband, the notorious murderer and intriguer Larsan, still lives, despite reports of his death. Boarding a train with her new husband, she lets out a scream. Her husband explains: "In the compartment a small door leading into the dressing room was half open, so that anyone entering the compartment got an oblique view of it. A mirror was fixed to the small door. Now in that mirror Mathilde had seen Larsan's face!" Rushing onto the platform, Mons. Darzac also glimpses the sinister ex-husband lurking. However, he and Rouletabille decide that for the sake of Mathilde's sanity they must convince her that she saw only an optical illusion, based on a "curious reflection."²⁵ Mathilde stays up all night in the compartment with the light on, veiling the mirror with her handkerchief to avoid seeing Larsan's face again, as if unconsciously following the Jewish rituals of mourning, in which mirrors are veiled after a death in order to avoid seeing apparitions.

While I don't want to overstress the contrasting approaches these two works have to their scenes of mediated vision, I do want to emphasize their common theme of uncanny vision, of the sudden appearance of another scene within this one. Mathilde's vision almost involuntarily recalls Freud's account of his uncanny experience riding in a train compartment, when a jolt "swung back the door of the adjoining washing-cabinet, and an elderly gentleman in a dressing-gown and a traveling cap came in. . . . Jumping up with the intention of putting him right, I at once realized to my dismay that the intruder was nothing but my own reflection in the looking glass on the open door. I can still recollect that I thoroughly disliked his appearance."²⁶ Freud interprets his dislike as a vestigial trace of the uncanny fear

25. Leroux, *Perfume*, 45.

26. Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny,'" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), 17:248.

of mirror reflections, but we might describe his reaction in more Benjaminian spatial terms.

The railway compartment, with its attempt to provide all the comforts of home while traveling, in effect constitutes (as Schivelbusch shows) another of the contradictory spatial figures of modernity, an unmoored *intérieur*, rolling through space at great speed. Everything in the design of the railway compartment strives to make the traveler forget that he is not at home. The mirror image functions, then, less as an uncanny double than as what Freud names it, an “intruder,” a messenger from the outside disrupting the illusion of homey security. This reminder of the true state of affairs—the compartment’s insecure mastery of privacy, its actually mobile and insecure place within a public and technological system—is conveyed optically. The truly uncanny moment comes—as anyone who has had a similar experience can testify, despite Freud’s silence—from the lack of self-recognition. The dreamer of the *intérieur* has so defensively identified with his precarious privacy that even his own image appears as an alien intruder.

The fascination that Freud’s essay “The ‘Uncanny’” exerts owes less to his psychoanalytical explanation of the experience offered than to his complex description of the effect itself. Performing an essential and canny transformation of Freud’s method, Benjamin explains such experiences in terms of the conflict between individual and collective psychologies that capitalism engenders. The unconscious that operates in Benjamin’s arcades, while certainly not unrelated to Freud’s analysis of dreams and parapraxis, opens itself up to the invasion of social history. This invasion operates via the optical unconscious that Benjamin describes in “The Work of Art” essay, a perceptual mechanism that takes in more than it can consciously account for.²⁷ This unconscious, therefore, cannot be reduced to a dream from which one must be awakened—just as its complex optics generates something more than an illusion that must be dispelled. These optical experiences of a sudden invasion of the interior by the exterior, and vice versa, undermine maintaining any absolute separation between the realms. As critical moments, they act like the monads that Benjamin frequently evokes as the basis of his method. But these fragments do not simply contain the whole but expand and redefine it. They are explosive monads, moments that shatter the apparently secure dichotomies on which a system of social control and illusory satisfactions are founded. This may

27. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 236–37.

be why Benjamin refers to his method in *The Arcades Project* as comparable “to the splitting of the atom,” liberating the energies of history from the narcotic of the “once upon a time” (*AP*, N3,4).

Like the visual attractions of popular culture, the phantasmagoria, the panorama, the kaleidoscope, or the halls of mirrors, the detective story activates the complex dialectical optics of modernity, an optics based not only on the visual mastery of surveillance but also on the uncanny experience of transformed vision, glimpsing a presence where it is not, a space where it does not belong, and triggering a frisson of possible recognition, “the flash of wakened consciousness” (*AP*, K1,2). The optical trick that may occasion this flash involves turning the methods of psychoanalysis inside out, so that we see Freud less as a psychologized Sherlock Holmes rifling through the archives of personal memory for clues to a primal crime than as a ruthless surveyor of the modern barriers between self and society. Benjamin urges us to transfer Freud’s methods “from the individual to the collective” (*AP*, K1,5). This reversal becomes a method itself, because, as he adds immediately:

Of course much of what is external to the former [the individual] is internal to the latter [the collective]: architecture, fashion—yes even the weather—are, in the interior of the collective, what the sensoria of organs, the feeling of sickness or health, are inside the individual. And so long as they preserve this unconscious, amorphous dream configuration, they are as much natural processes as digestion, breathing, and the like. They stand in the cycle of the eternally selfsame, until the collective seizes upon them in politics and history emerges. (*AP*, K1,5)

The uncanny *déjà vu* that overcomes the flaneur in the arcade foreshadows this method, because it leads “into a past that can be all the more profound because it is not his own, not private . . . it is not a past coming from his own youth, from a recent youth, but a childhood lived before then that speaks to him” (*AP*, e°,1). Thus, the dream, the uncanny intoxication, is not the logical contradiction of awakening but its basis. As in Rita van Arsdale’s flash of vision, reexperienced as recognition, the images granted by unconscious optics must “be secured on the level of the historical, and collectively. There is a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been: its advancement has the structure of awakening” (*AP*, K1,2). But far from dispelling the dream, this process of awakening relies on remembering it: “The new dialectical method of doing history presents itself as the art of experi-

encing the present as waking world, a world to which the dream we name the past refers in truth. To pass through and carry out *what has been* in remembering the dream!" (AP, K1,3).

This method coincides with what Benjamin describes as the "dialectical optic," which surrealism foresees in its nesting of the mysterious within the everyday, rediscovering the dialectic of *heimlich* and *unheimlich* through turning inside out the dream, revealing its collective interior, concealed within an individualist psychology: "For histrionic or fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious takes us no further; we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday world, by virtue of a dialectical optic that perceives the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday" (SW, 2:217). The surrealists offered Benjamin the glimpse of a method in which the mystery and its solution were not antithetical but mutually engendered each other. The flash of dialectical optics reveals both the solution of the mystery and the truth of the dream. One learns something from the flash of recognition, but one also discovers through it a mode of knowledge that exceeds logical categories of verification. One could say that the optics of the detective reveals the canny aspect of the uncanny, not simply that which can be logically verified but, following up the associations of *canny* in English, a sort of knack, a knowledge, that comes from practice and tradition, the ground on which subjective insight opens onto a collective culture.²⁸

The uncanny, properly understood, evokes the seduction of the strange, the revelation through *déjà vu* that our deepest memories do not belong to us alone. As a figure of *colportage*, the detective enacts within a popular medium a new dramaturgy based precisely on the topologies of bourgeois space that Benjamin analyzes in his discussion of both detective

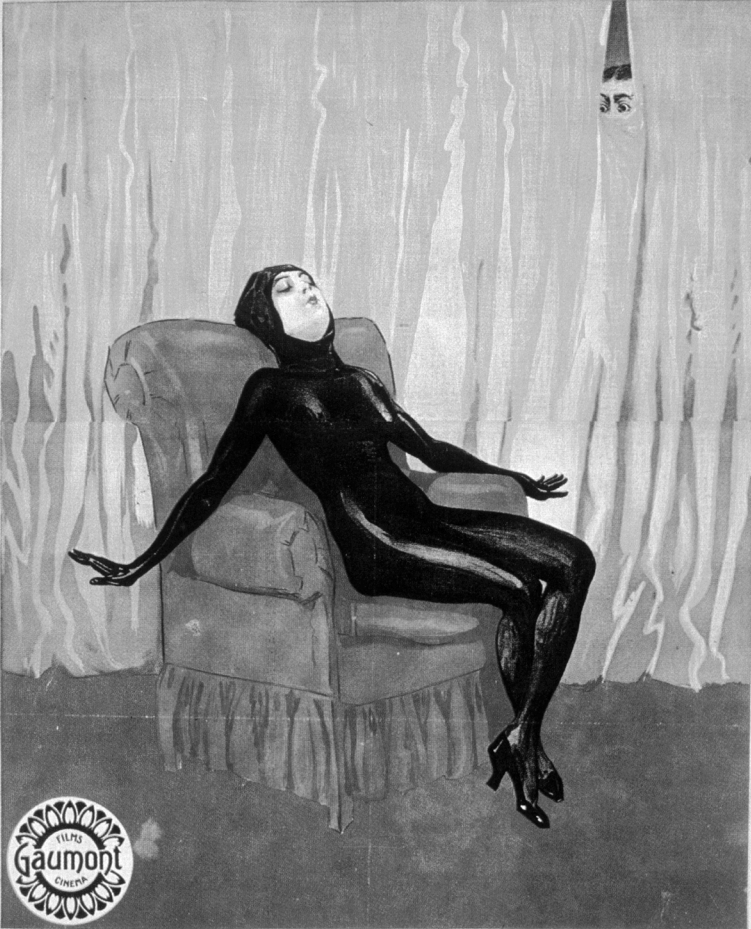
28. Strachey's translation of Freud's *unheimlich* as "uncanny," which he admits "is not, of course, an exact equivalent" (*Standard Edition*, 17:219, n. 1), has both virtues and limitations. Most obviously the association of the root *heim*—"home"—and *heimlich*—"homely" or "familiar"—are lost and must be supplied by Strachey in his footnotes. However, *uncanny* does share the curious virtue with the German word of having an opposite that converges into a near synonym. *Canny* and *uncanny* derive from the root *can*, meaning "to know, to be able." Thus, an "uncanny" ability with a knife indicates an intensification of a "canny" ability with a knife, rather than its reversal. Further, *canny* takes on the idea of craft in both the sense of skill and the sense of being wily, or artful. The term can even take on the occult connotations usually attributed to *uncanny*—for example, calling a midwife or a "wisewoman" a "canny wife" or "canny woman" (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "canny"). Thus the word preserves an understanding of knowledge that exceeds the rational but is founded in craft and praxis.

fiction and the arcades: the interpenetration of public and private, interior and exterior, which exposes the antinomies of bourgeois subjectivity and experience. The truth the detective seeks is inadequately figured as disciplinary surveillance (Foucault), as the influence of scientific empirical investigation on popular culture (Régis Messac), or even as an emblem of the divine justice unreachable in modern times (Siegfried Kracauer).²⁹ Rather, the detective exploits and develops the new dialectical optical experience of modernity, employing a vision simultaneously uncanny and canny, piercing to the foundations of nothingness on which bourgeois culture rests in the period of late capitalism. The detective announces the method that Benjamin's *Arcades Project* exemplifies. "Nevertheless, truth is not—as Marxism would have it—a merely contingent function of knowing, but is bound to a nucleus of time lying hidden within the knower and the known alike. This is so true that the eternal, in any case, is far more the ruffle on a dress than some idea" (*AP*, N3,2). The detective's methodical scrutiny of objects and ability to respond to unconscious optical experience adumbrates a method that will turn that ruffle inside out, finding within its immemorial folds both the space within a space and the time within time.³⁰

29. See Régis Messac, *Le "Detective Novel" et l'influence de la pensée scientifique* (Paris: Librairie Ancienne Honoré Champion, 1929); Siegfried Kracauer, *Der Detektiv-Roman*, in *Schriften*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971). The primary application of Foucault to the detective novel has been made in D. A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

30. Clearly what I have described in this essay as the uncanny or dialectical optic of the detective relates to what Benjamin describes as the "optical unconscious" in both his "Work of Art" essay and the "Short History of Photography." But I claim that, in pondering the detective and the arcade, Benjamin finds in the optic not simply an experience but the basis of a method of analysis embodied in *The Arcades Project* itself. Clearly this method bears a profound relation to what he describes as "the mimetic faculty" and the concept Miriam Hansen has isolated in his work of "innervation" (see Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One Way Street," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 [winter 1999]: 306–43). However, I believe that this uncanny optics represents a method both intimately related to these other terms and yet not strictly identical to them.

LES FILMS MYSTÉRIEUX



LES VAMPIRES * LES YEUX OUI FASCINENT

Irma Vep uneasy in her easy chair, a poster from Feuillade's serial *Les Vampires*, 1916. Poster from author's collection.

The Concept of Fashion in *The Arcades Project*

Peter Wollen

Convolute B in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* is devoted to fashion.¹ It contains no less than ninety-one items, but it would be quite wrong to assume that all of Benjamin's citations and observations on the subject of fashion—more specifically, on fashion with respect to clothes—are to be found only there. Remarks devoted to fashion are scattered throughout the rest of the volume, hidden away in various other batches of material. When Georges Bataille invited Benjamin to lecture at the Collège de Sociologie in 1939, Benjamin suggested fashion as his subject. It is a recurrent theme within *The Arcades Project* and one to which Benjamin gave considerable thought, although he was sometimes quite inconsistent in his attitudes toward it, as he veered between viewing fashion, on the one hand, as a manifestation of commodity culture—or, more specifically, of commodity fetishism—and, on the other hand, as the manifestation of a long-repressed utopian desire, to be reenergized at a moment of historical awakening (*AP*,

1. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999). Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *AP* and by convolute.

B1a,2; K2a,4). In numerous remarks on the subject of fashion, Benjamin made use of his concept of the “dialectical image,” a concept he seems to have seen as the keystone of his entire enterprise but that, given the unfinished nature of the project, still remains somewhat obscure.

As Ulrich Lehmann points out in his recent book *Tigersprung*,² an absorbing and pioneering study of fashion in modernity, Benjamin’s writings on the subject of modernity did not simply cite Charles Baudelaire but also derived conceptually from Baudelaire, as demonstrated, for example, by his observation in *Central Park* that “Baudelaire was perhaps the first to conceive of an originality appropriate to the market, which was at the time just for that reason more original than any other.”³ The important assumptions here are that “originality” is a virtue—one that Benjamin himself exhibited—and that it should be considered specifically in its historical context. Benjamin was ready to endorse Baudelaire’s wish to find the originality appropriate to *his* context, that of a newly burgeoning market economy. Théophile Gautier had mistakenly understood Baudelaire’s acceptance of fashion as paradigmatic for modern aesthetics as implying a surrender to the market. On the contrary, Baudelaire had proposed that the power of originality or novelty could be reawakened in the future, serving as inspiration for a further wave of change.

In this context, Lehmann cites Karl Marx’s observation, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, that the great French revolutionaries “Desmoulins, Danton, Robespierre, Saint-Just, Napoleon, the heroes as well as the parties and the masses of the old French Revolution, performed their task in Roman costume and with Roman phrases, the task of unchaining and setting up modern *bourgeois society*.”⁴ Subsequently, linking Baudelaire directly to Marx, Benjamin noted, in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, that the site of history “is not homogeneous and empty time, but one filled by now-time. For Robespierre, the Rome of antiquity was thus charged with now-time and blasted from the continuum of history. The French Revolution regarded itself as Rome reincarnate. It quoted ancient Rome as fashion quotes a past attire. Fashion has the scent of the mod-

2. Ulrich Lehmann, *Tigersprung: Fashion in Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

3. See Lehmann, *Tigersprung*, 201, on Benjamin’s use of Simmel in his discussion of Baudelaire, to be found in *Central Park*, fragments, ca. 1938–1940. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus* (A lyric poet in the era of high capitalism) (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 160.

4. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, in *Marx and Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 11 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), 104. Cited in Lehmann, *Tigersprung*, 36.

ern wherever it stirs in the thicket of what has been. It is the tiger's leap (*Tigersprung*) into the past."⁵ From Baudelaire the torch passed to Stéphane Mallarmé, who actually edited a fashion magazine, *La Dernière Mode*, and from Mallarmé, via Guillaume Apollinaire's *The Poet Assassinated*, to the surrealists—André Breton or Max Ernst, with his lithograph *FIAT MODES—pereat ars*. We should also remember that Breton himself worked for the great couturier Jacques Doucet, just as Man Ray worked for Paul Poiret, and both Salvador Dalí and Meret Oppenheim worked for Elsa Schiaparelli. Surrealism and fashion mingled, just as surrealism and Marxism mingled.

However, to understand Benjamin's views on fashion more fully, it is also necessary to look more closely at the history of fashion as it developed in nineteenth-century France. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, as Philippe Perrot points out in his book *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie*, clothing in France was predominantly "made-to-measure" rather than "ready-to-wear."⁶ As a result of the Revolution, the initiative in fashion had begun to pass from the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie, which initiated its own system of fashion, replacing the old model, which had been built on an aristocratic monopoly of luxury. The new system was one that required an ability to discriminate, to make judgments of taste. Within this new system, wealth rather than rank as such became important, but also the ability to deploy wealth, through fashion, as a form of symbolic capital, one that attracted both attention and envy, as well as respect.

Under the ancien régime, the making and selling of clothes had been regulated by guild rules and regulations. The customer bought materials from the draper and then took them to the tailor. Tailors, who dressed women as well as men, could not legally stock or sell cloth, and, conversely, drapers could not legally make clothes. Originally anonymous, tailors, dressmakers, and milliners eventually succeeded in building public reputations for themselves and their work. Marie Antoinette's dressmaker, Rose Bertin, for example, became a great celebrity, and tales were widely told about her impertinence as well as her skill. In time, tailors and dressmakers opened workshops and boutiques in the Rue Saint-Honoré, to which aristocrats themselves would go, rather than the dressmakers going to the aristocrats. The Revolution did little to change the system, but it did change the clientele.

5. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968), 261. My translation.

6. Philippe Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Richard Biévenu (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994). Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically as *FB*.

The boutiques of famous tailors and dressmakers were visited not just by rich Parisians but also by provincial visitors and even foreigners, including foreign royalty.

In time, the fashion houses gradually moved from the Rue Saint Honoré to the area around the Rue De Richelieu and thence, in the 1860s, to the Rue De La Paix, where they still prosper. In other areas, shops catered to a less demanding (read less wealthy) clientele. At the lower end of the scale was the Temple neighborhood (and even the Place du Louvre), where used clothes were still sold. In time, the used clothing business moved into covered markets, newly built for the secondhand trade. It was the existence of flourishing markets for used clothing that eventually stimulated the manufacture of ready-to-wear clothes as such. Legal obstacles to such an industry had already been removed by the Revolution. The tailors fought hard against the competition of ready-to-wear manufacture, forcing the mercer Pierre Parissot, a pioneer in the manufacture and sale of specialized work clothes with clearly marked prices, to use prison workshops for labor, a strategy that backfired on them, since it simply enabled Parissot to cut his own prices. In the 1840s, the market for ready-to-wear took off in a serious way, and the first sweatshops began to appear. A system of sizes, patterns, and measurements made it possible to sell clothes that fit customers—first male, and then female (by around 1845)—and emulated the more expensive made-to-order fashions. The sweatshops' clientele began to extend upward into the lower middle class and eventually beyond.

Low-paid jobbing tailors and dressmakers were gradually forced out of business, but the made-to-measure elite were still able to regroup. Charles Worth reformulated the role of the made-to-order dressmaker at much the same time that the “fancy goods store” evolved into the department store, which became the primary site for the sale of ready-to-wear clothes. The department stores attracted customers with low (and marked) prices, attractive displays, polite sales clerks, and a wide range of choice, prioritizing rapid turnover with a high volume of sales, stimulated by lower prices and new advertising techniques. This, in turn, involved a transformation of the French textile industry, which expanded rapidly, turning out both fabrics and ready-to-wear garments on an unprecedented scale. At the same time, the Haussmannization of Paris, whose importance Benjamin himself clearly foregrounds, brought with it a growing market as Paris expanded, its population increased, and public transport developed. Around 1860, the ready-to-wear industry began to mechanize, and, by the 1880s, sewing-machine workers were gathered into factories instead of working at home.

Inevitably small tailors began to disappear. Dressmakers of women's clothing were more resilient, partly because fit was considered more important in the context of female attire, so customized sewing persisted in Paris for some time. At the same time, the secondhand market shriveled away, leaving a two-tier system—an elite of made-to-order dressmakers and the surviving cadre of prestige tailors, who charged high prices to a demanding clientele, and, at a lower social level, an industrialized ready-to-wear market, catering to the small businessman, the low-level bureaucrat, the white-collar employee, and so on. The ready-to-wear industry began to imitate the styles and designs of the elite made-to-order tailors and couturiers, producing what Perrot calls “false luxury” (*FB*, 72) clothing, based on made-to-order originals, but with variations and additions. The next stage was the incorporation of the proletariat into the ready-to-wear system. As late as 1848, workers were still wearing smocks. First came the transition to ready-to-wear for Sunday dress and then complete integration of the working class into the new clothing economy. In the countryside, the effect was not felt until the expansion of the railroads in the 1860s, after which traditional rural costume was finally vanquished by the new salesmanship.

Benjamin's interest in fashion, however, was primarily in the psychology, phenomenology, and aesthetics of the consumption and display of clothing, rather than in the history of the garment industry. Inevitably, however, the two are related, as the textile industry attempts to control the fashion phenomenon rather than leave it in the consumers' hands. Fashion is both a matter of individual choice and of group psychology, as Ernst Simmel points out in his short book *The Philosophy of Fashion*, first published in 1905 and cited by Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*. As Simmel puts it, fashion “satisfies the need for distinction, the tendency towards differentiation, change, and individual contrast.” On the other hand, fashion is also “the imitation of a given pattern and thus satisfies the need for social adaptation; it leads the individual on to the path that everyone travels, it furnishes a general condition that resolves the conduct of every individual into a mere example.”⁷ Fashion can differentiate its wearer from the norm or, through imitation, it can assimilate its wearer into a group. The individual can be either an original, an initiator of fashion, or a copycat, a dedicated follower of fashion.

Benjamin differentiates between dandy as hero, commissioning clothes to order, and the unheroic consumer, who buys ready-to-wear. In

7. Ernst Simmel, “Fashion,” *International Quarterly* (New York, 1904), English version of *Philosophie der Mode* (The philosophy of fashion) (Berlin: Pan Verlag, 1905).

“On the Theory of Dandyism,” he notes that “the tailor’s is the last line of business in which the customer is still catered to on an individual basis. Story of the twelve frock coats. More and more, the person commissioning the work plays a heroic role” (*AP*, J79,3). The story of the twelve frock coats, sadly, remains untraced, but Benjamin’s preference for made-to-measure clothing (and the individual who initiates a style in collaboration with a tailor or dressmaker) is quite explicit. Under the old regime, clothing was subject to fixed sartorial codes, through which prestige and distinction were distributed according to rank. The bourgeoisie emulated aristocratic dress, but they also took care *not* to wear clothes that would be considered above their station. After the Revolution, as society became both more prosperous and more mobile, sartorial value was no longer determined through a fixed code but through the machinery of fashion. Even inexpensive clothes could now be fashionable. As Perrot notes, “Clothing becomes a field for rivalry in every society with some mobility, some possibility of wanting what others desire,” thereby affecting the overall pace and nature of change (*FB*, 25).

Perrot also argues that changes in fashion are best discussed in terms of changing silhouettes, setting aside the detail of seasonal or annual changes in fashion, which can be considered simply as epiphenomena, in order to focus on longer cycles (*FB*, 26). Up until 1836, for example, fashions in France determined that the calf should be exposed, while from 1837 to 1913, “dresses remained steadfastly at a length that made it difficult to glimpse the tips of the high-buttoned shoes” (*FB*, 26). Within this cycle, however, the width of dresses varied much more frequently. After the post-Napoleonic Restoration of 1815, again around 1830, and more markedly after 1854, dresses “grew fuller and more flower-shaped” (*FB*, 26). In 1859, the circular crinoline was at its zenith, and in 1866, the egg-shaped crinoline became popular, shrinking gradually until, in 1868, it gave way to the bustle. Padding at the rear now exaggerated the train, a trend that lasted over a considerable period of time until, around 1880, the train itself disappeared. The bustle vanished around 1878 but made a comeback in 1884, leading to a period in which dresses began to puff out again, lasting until 1898. In a similar way, the waist, so high under the Consulate and the Empire, went back to its “natural” position in 1833, and then rose year by year until it reached a high point in 1874, after which it, too, began its slow descent, which lasted all the way through until the 1920s (*FB*, 26–27).

In 1928, Princess Marthe Bibesco observed of these movements of female fashion that “this pace of expansion and contraction has some regularity; it must correspond to star movements and celestial seasons as yet

uncalendared.”⁸ Perrot comments that “such a ‘calendar’ is all the more difficult to establish because it is neither independent of historical vicissitudes nor correlated to them” (*FB*, 27). In his view, the tradition bequeathed by the ancien régime remained more or less intact for women, except that there was now much more choice available, leading to the imposition of regularly changing cycles of fashion, whereas men’s clothes, which had been completely transformed by the Revolution, were spared the imposition of cyclical change. It is in this context that dandyism, as Benjamin frequently notes, could still be seen in terms of personal eccentricity. Women’s fashions, however, followed a specific regime. New fashions originated from the great houses that specialized in made-to-measure haute couture—first Worth, then the House of Redfern, Poiret, Schiaparelli, Christian Dior, and their corporate successors.

The style created for the rich and aristocratic clients of nineteenth-century designers would soon filter down, often in an exaggerated form, into the demimonde, the world of mistresses and adventuresses (*cocottes* or *biches*), of once fine ladies who had become *déclassées* because of some scandal or divorce, of show business personalities, actresses, dancers, and singers. The rich bourgeoisie would then adopt the fashion after a short delay, wearing it in an adjusted form, discarding its more outlandish features, stressing fashionability and opulence, but without too much stylistic extravagance. The old and still powerful aristocracy, however, viewed things differently. As Mme. de Girardin puts it, in a letter of 27 April 1839,

Should a beauty from the Chaussée d’Antin [where the rich bourgeoisie lived] go to a banker’s ball, in a gown trimmed with eight flounces, she will be thought charming. The eight flounces will be appreciated and envied by rival dresses with only four, five or six flounces. To have eight declares: I do things more lavishly than you; I am elegant to the eighth degree; I have more than your two quarterings of nobility. I value myself and I am worth two flounces more than you. . . . But supposing the same beauty, before going to the ball, calls on the true-blue [highly aristocratic] residents of the faubourg Saint-Germain, the people who do not cross to the Right Bank, never attend plays, and devote themselves to atoning in a profound retreat for the pleasures other Paris neighborhoods enjoy. Can you imagine the effect of those eight flounces on that nobly simple and charitably reasonable world?

8. Princess Marthe Bibesco, *Noblesse de Robe* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1928), 212–13. Cited in *FB*, 27.

Those eight flounces are scandalous; that “cachuca” appalls every-one’s good taste.⁹

The lower orders (shopkeepers, civil servants, and the like) took up the fashions after a significant delay, when they were already thought outmoded by their social superiors. The rise of ready-to-wear meant, of course, that versions of high fashion would soon become available to the richer peasants and the more prosperous workers. The descent of fashions into the lower classes was eased by their imitation and appropriation by the servants and jobbing dressmakers of the upper class. Inevitably, widespread adoption of a fashion by the lower orders automatically signaled that it was now outdated, even for the lower classes. The process might last a whole year, but eventually the ailing fashion would be over and done with in Paris, even if it were still wending its way through the provinces.

Benjamin was fascinated by the combination of novelty with repetition that characterized the movement of fashion. In his “First Sketch” of *The Arcades*, he notes that fashion involves “a sort of race for first place in the social creation. The running begins anew at every instant. Contrast between fashion and uniform”—where fashion is ephemeral and uniform, set and fixed (*AP*, P°,7). Elsewhere he observes “the infinite possibilities of permutation” that exist “with the elements of fashion” (*AP*, 900). At another point, he comments on the similarity between fashion and the weather, noting how they each “stand in the cycle of the eternally selfsame,” “the ever-recurrent,” while varying unpredictably at the same time. Fashion, he notes, bears a particular relationship to time, especially to newness, “a quality which is independent from the use value of the commodity.” In fact, fashion can be seen as “the mould in which modernity is cast.” Yet fashion also carries a particular relationship with death, which Benjamin appears to see in two different ways—first, as related to the cyclical nature of fashion, but second, as having an intimate relationship to the body, which it both conceals and aims to renovate, by association with its own novelty.

It is precisely in order to make sense out of the paradox of fashion that Benjamin introduces his concept of the “dialectical image.” As he puts it, it is first necessary to “overcome the ideology of progress” (*AP*, K2,3), something that is already implicit in what we might call the ideology of fashion, precisely because of its cyclical nature, its endless reiteration of novelty and obsolescence, each caught in an endlessly self-canceling relationship with

9. Mme. Émile de Girardin, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 4, *Lettres Parisiennes*, 335 (letter of 27 April 1839). Cited in *FB*, 176.

the other. Fashion is the crucial element of the social superstructure, if we are to understand the significance of history in a nonprogressive manner. According to Benjamin, "The economic conditions in which society exists are expressed [but not reflected] in the superstructure," expressed, in fact, in the way that the content of dreams can be seen as the expression of the sleeper's state of being—the "conditions of life" that subsequently "find their expression in the dream and their interpretation in the awakening" (*AP*, K2,5). Awakening releases the utopian desire that was contained in the dream, a desire that is particularly powerful within the dreamworld of fashion, the Janus-faced world of the "eternally up-to-date," from whose eternal recurrence the unique can only be rescued politically, through the recovery on reawakening of long-buried utopian dreams (see *AP*, K2,3).

Utopianism is crucial to Benjamin's project. Charles Fourier comes fourth, after Baudelaire, Victor Hugo, and Marx, in the count of citations. Then, after Honoré de Balzac, come the Saint-Simonians, followed by Auguste Blanqui and Friedrich Engels, Edgar Allan Poe and Gautier, Marcel Proust and Grandville—three novelists, three poets, three utopians, the two founders of dialectical materialism, a revolutionary, and a caricaturist. The references to Baudelaire in relation to fashion are particularly extensive. Baudelaire, Benjamin notes, developed his "taste for modernity" in an obsessive concern for the details of fashion and dress (*AP*, B8a,2). He was fascinated both by the novelty and by the arbitrariness of fashion—an arbitrariness that Benjamin connects to his own interest in allegory (see *AP*, J24,2). More significantly, Benjamin notes that, for Baudelaire, "the things that have gone out of fashion have become inexhaustible containers of memories" (*AP*, J71,2). It is at this point that Baudelaire is linked to Proust, through the significance given to memory, and thus the link is made, once again, to Benjamin's own concern with memory: "In the same way in which Proust begins his life story with waking, each representation of history has to start with waking; in fact, it should not be concerned with anything else. So this book [*The Arcades Project*] is about waking from the nineteenth century" (*AP*, N4,3).

For Benjamin, as for Baudelaire, the way into memory is through those "things that have gone out of fashion,"¹⁰ which were once, when they first appeared, considered as the height of novelty, until fashion, like the weather, changed, and they were discarded. Here, of course, we encounter

10. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: NLB, 1973).

the image of the ragpicker, who searches out what has been discarded in order to return it, made new, back into circulation. Similarly, we are reminded of Benjamin's description of the relationship of the individual to the crowd in Baudelaire's poetry, the situation of "the solitary who, to be sure, fades into the multitude, but not before appearing with singular physiognomy to one who allows her gaze to linger."¹¹ The mechanics of fashion, it seems, follow a very similar pattern, a coincidence of the singular with the norm and the group, within which the individual is both singular *and* assimilated. Benjamin wanted to bring back into circulation a past discarded as meaningless and to translate it into a vision of a transformed future, one in which the dreams of past visionaries—Marx, Fourier, or Saint-Simon—and the utopian dreams still hidden away within the outmoded could each be revived and projected into the future.

At this point, I think, it is worth looking in more detail at the work of Worth, usually deemed to have been the originator of haute couture.¹² Charles Frederick Worth was born in England, in a small market town, in 1825. As a young man, he left for London, where he worked for the royal family's silk mercers, through whom he learned the rudiments of textile buying and dressmaking. In 1845, just after his twentieth birthday, Worth left for Paris. The Revolution of 1848 was followed by the Napoleonic Restoration. The new Bonaparte emperor was eager to form an alliance with England, and this political priority led to a fashion for all things English. Worth then married an employee, Marie Vernet, whose job was to model clothes for prospective textile buyers. He began by designing his wife's costumes, and soon afterward he was permitted to open a small dressmaking department. In 1858, he opened his own shop, which quickly became popular.

Worth was now able to persuade the empress herself to buy a silk brocade dress, on the grounds that she would thus be helping the silk industry in Lyon, a pragmatic argument strongly supported by the emperor. Soon he was providing her regularly with gowns for balls and other court occasions. In 1863, he began to raise the hemline, after the empress complained that her skirt became dirty from the country walks she enjoyed. Marie Worth first modeled the new hemline in public, braving the raised eyebrows. Court ladies soon took up the look, and finally the empress herself wore it at Trouville. In April 1864, a magazine cartoon depicted two street cleaners complaining that ladies' skirts were no longer doing their job for them! That same

11. Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*.

12. The following biographical information is from Edith Saunders, *The Age of Worth, Couturier to the Empress Eugénie* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955).

year, Worth began to shrink the crinoline, shifting the emphasis toward the rear. The success of the new style largely depended on its suitability for wearing at the theater, where space was more constricted than in the ballroom. He also introduced matching separates—a gown and cape, for example, for the Princess Metternich, which launched yet another look that soon worked its way down the fashion chain. Worth began to launch new styles on a regular basis—getting rid of the ubiquitous shawl, for instance, and replacing it with a mantilla. Finally, in 1868, he abolished crinoline hoops and raised waistlines, an image based on a celebrated gown worn by the Queen of Denmark at the end of the seventeenth century, with the difference being that he now used a Napoleonic rather than a baroque position for the waistline.

Worth's dress designs first became fashionable when worn at court, then perhaps at the theater, at the races, or in the park, before they were adopted by the bourgeoisie, at which point Worth sought a fresh form of innovation, perhaps for reasons suggested by a powerful client, perhaps because he had been intrigued by a fashion from the past, perhaps because his interest was piqued by the possibility of an interesting new idea. In the twentieth century, not much was very different, although the need for innovation was markedly more urgent as the ready-to-wear industry expanded. In this context, it is interesting to look at the experience of Elizabeth Hawes, a dress designer who was also a political activist on the Left, who went to work in a factory, was praised by Bertolt Brecht, and was watched by the FBI. Hawes had learned her trade in Paris, where she worked for Madame Groutl, a leading couturiere. She also worked as a sketch artist, drawing the new dresses when they were first displayed on the runway, so that copies, based on her drawings, could then be made by the ready-to-wear manufacturers, who worked closely with wholesalers and department stores in France and America. It was not until the 1960s that designers—Pierre Cardin in the forefront—began to license their new designs.¹³

Hawes is also notable for explicitly emphasizing the utopian aspect of fashion. She designed clothes for men in pinks and bright blues, in silks and satins, with robes and skirts and without ties, clothes with diagonal stripes to be buttoned at the back, like a dentist. Her ambition was to move male fashions closer to female ones, and vice versa, inspired by a dream of putting an end to a regime of sexual difference that she saw as harmful to both sexes. It turned out, of course, to be a utopian project in the anti-utopian sense of

13. See Elizabeth Hawes, *Men Can Take It*, illustrated by James Thurber (New York: Random House, 1939).

the word—visionary, but unrealistic. Nonetheless, she showed how fashion did not have to be governed by an unacknowledged classism or sexism, that it could indeed be a vehicle for a utopian consciousness. In *Tigersprung*, discussing “fashion in modernity,” Lehmann notes that Marx maintains, in the *Critique of Political Economy*, that clothes are unlike other commodities in that “it is only through the act of wearing that the dress becomes a dress proper,” thereby sloughing off its commodity status.¹⁴ In this sense, fashion mediates, as Benjamin notes, between fetish commodity and individual wearer, as between inactive object and active subject.

As I understand it, Benjamin believed that, on awakening, it was both necessary and possible for our dreams to be interpreted, if we were to be liberated from the burden of our forgotten past, as Freud had demonstrated, albeit in a very different context. This process of historical remembering and interpreting was the precondition of any future liberation from the constraints that the grip of the past had placed on our understanding of the present and thus on the possibility of future action. However, quite rightly, Benjamin did not limit his interest in fashion to its sociological context, its relationship to class, money, and prestige. He understood that the sensuous and poetic aspects, the aesthetic and psychological aspects of costume, should not and cannot be discounted. Fashion displays both an object lesson in commodity culture and a possibility of messianic redemption. Benjamin never completed his project, but this, I believe, would have been his conclusion—just as *The Arcades Project*, designed so seductively by Gwen Nefsky Frankfeldt, might itself become a kind of fetishized fashion accessory, while also being, at the very same time, an item that contains in itself the seeds of redemption. After all, as Eric Hobsbawm noted in his book *The Age of Extremes*, “Why brilliant fashion-designers, a notoriously non-analytic breed, sometimes succeed in anticipating the shape of things to come better than professional predictors, is one of the most obscure questions in history; and, for the historian of culture, one of the most central.”¹⁵

14. Karl Marx, *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, in *Marx and Engels, Collected Works*, vol. 28 (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), 28. Cited in Lehmann, *Tigersprung*, 277.

15. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World, 1914–1991* (New York: Pantheon, 1994), 178.

Architectural History: Benjamin and Hölderlin

Claudia Brodsky Lacour

Vgl. dagegen Hölderlin: "Ich liebe das
Geschlecht der kommenden Jahrhunderte."

Compare with Hölderlin: "I love the
genus of the coming centuries."
—Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk*

Passagen are buildings, and the name of Walter Benjamin's work. This in itself presents no small stumbling block to understanding the *Passagenwerk*. In his important introduction to its first edition, Rolf Tiedemann employs the "image" of a "house" or "building" to describe the structure of Benjamin's unprecedented construct, developing the terms "building materials," "sketch," "excavation site," "floors," and "walls" to convey the "architecture of the whole," or, as he puts it, "to stay within the image."¹ Yet as Tiede-

1. Rolf Tiedemann, "Einleitung des Herausgebers," in Walter Benjamin, *Passagenwerk*, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 8 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974–89), 1:9–41 (esp. 12–14), hereafter cited parenthetically as *GS*. Passages from the body of the *Passagenwerk* will be referred to as *PW* by convolute. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

mann's inaugural exposé turns from structural to historical and conceptual concerns, the metaphor that the *Passagenwerk* seems immediately to suggest be substituted for itself becomes, at the very least, untenable in the logical sense, for this is a "building," Tiedemann notes, "with two very different plans," having "received," midconstruction, a second "foundation . . . capable of carrying greater weight" (*GS*, 1:14, 25). Despite that formal and historical discontinuity, "the reader . . . may perhaps image to his speculative eye . . . the building Benjamin never built" (*GS*, 1:14). Yet such an imagining must remain "in shadowy outlines," "the shadows" that "confront" any attempt to "trace" a "consistent overview" of the building's "architecture" because they originate not in speculative but rather "philological difficulties" (*GS*, 1:14). And with the mention of philological, or specifically textual, difficulties, the metaphor of the text as "building" falls away within Tiedemann's essay, "the image" it was to stay "within" now become an insufficient synecdoche for the disparate whole it attempts to explain. The *Passagen* themselves, Tiedemann cautions correctively, "are only one theme alongside many" in the work that bears their name (*GS*, 1:15).

One philological, rather than metaphorical, way to approach a text for which no image or ready-made conceptual language accounts is to compare it to other work in which descriptive metaphor and philology do not mesh. The inability of attentive commentary to "remain within the image" is a measure of the "philological difficulties" residing in just that discrepancy. For little indicates as clearly the depths of difficulty encountered in places of textual obscurity as the inadequacy of the terms by which those places are named. Named for an already outmoded form of building it reflects upon but does not and cannot represent, unprecedented not least in the degree to which it is composed of prosaic citations of preceding texts, Benjamin's unparalleled work is perhaps best recognized in the act of doing what it says—producing its own illuminating precedent in the present moment of legibility itself.

Following Benjamin's theory of reading as a "recognition" of "truly historical," "dialectical images"—images whose truth is neither descriptive nor pictorial but *immediately* historical, a present "loaded to the bursting point with time"—any recognition of the *Passagenwerk* on its *own* terms would have to recognize it in *other* terms, in the recognition of past images: "The read image, that is to say the image in the now of recognizability, carries in the highest degree the stamp of the critical, dangerous moment, which is at the basis of all reading" (*PW*, N3,1). It is the suggestion of the present essay that Benjamin's work, too, be read in this "critical," "historical"

sense, in the recognition of images whose truth can “come to legibility” [*zur Lesbarkeit kommen*] with the *Passagenwerk* “now” (*PW*, N3,1). In the language of the *Passagenwerk*, the “place” of that legibility is the “language” of the *Passagenwerk*, its own “time of truth” first “determined” as “present” by the images it brings to light, the “explosive” “meeting,” that Benjamin calls “reading,” of the “truly historical” with the “synchronic,” of dialectics with “standstill,” or the image itself (*PW*, N2a,3; N3,1). Like the *Passagenwerk*, published posthumously and composed of language in pieces, the images in question similarly come to us inflected by the persuasion and labor of friends and editors. Poetic work made of distinctly prosaic materials, in both the technical (editorial/curatorial) and lexical (generic/verbal) sense, its notorious philological difficulties appear frequently, and not coincidentally, under the names of built forms. It is “within the[se] image[s]”—that is, images of cognitive difficulties buried in other, past texts—that the *Passagenwerk* “remains” to be recognized, or read.²

The comparison suggested here, between Benjamin’s last work and Hölderlin’s “late” poetry, does not derive linearly from Benjamin’s own writ-

2. On the moment of recognition in language described by Benjamin, cf. Hölderlin from “Über die Verfahrungsweise des poetischen Geistes” (On the process of the poetic spirit): “Is language not like (re)cognition? . . . Just as (re)cognition avenges language, so language remembers (re)cognition” [*Ist die Sprache, wie die Erkenntnis. . . ? So wie die Erkenntnis die Sprache ahndet, so erinnert sich die Sprache der Erkenntnis*] (Friedrich Hölderlin, *Sämtliche Werke: Großer Stuttgarter Ausgabe*, ed. Friedrich Beissner and Adolf Beck [Frankfurt am Main: Stuttgart: 1943–85], 4:624, hereafter cited parenthetically as *StA*). On the linguistic nature of (re)cognition in Hölderlin: “Cognition aims at an anticipation or divination of a language *in which it can impart itself as remembrance*” (Rainer Nägele, *Echoes of Translation: Reading between Texts* [Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997], 41). See also Claudia Kalász, *Hölderlin: Die poetische Kritik instrumenteller Rationalität* (München: text + kritik, 1988), 82: “Hölderlin [understands] poetry as the verbal form of true (re)cognition, so that by the same token the manner of proceeding of the spirit for the poem should also be taken as exemplary of (re)cognizing and producing in general.” For Kalász, however, it is “the successful mediation of spirit and matter” [*die gelungene Vermittlung von Geist und Stoff*] that comprises the “foundation” [*Grundlegung*] of such poetic procedure, and thus of (re)cognition. It is precisely this traditional, Christian-Hegelian (although not Hegel’s own) view of romantic poetry that both Benjamin and (Hegel’s friend) Hölderlin negate through poetic procedures that render their own supposed or desired foundation appropriately impossible. As examined below, architecture and history are two images or passages in which that impossibility is recognized in their texts. Closer to Hölderlin’s and Benjamin’s view of (re)cognition in poetry is Lawrence Ryan, in *Friedrich Hölderlin* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1962), 7: “Hölderlin understands poetry neither as subjective confession nor as immediate announcement of feeling, but as ‘(re)cognition’ with a claim to objective validity.” See also p. 54.

ing on Hölderlin. When internally motivated descriptions, such as those afforded by metaphor and philology, fail to echo each other, external textual genealogy is doubly difficult to assert and, moreover, misses the point. This is to say, with Benjamin, that it misses the critical passages. For the *Passagenwerk* defines the “arriving [of images] at legibility” as “a certain critical point of the movement inside them” (*PW*, N3,1). Images, in other words, contain movement as much as they contain historical time, which is why Benjamin’s epistemology is so difficult to define. While based on the image, that epistemology describes images which are recognizable as such only insofar as they remain *unrecognizable* in time. For an image in Benjamin’s moment of recognition is—in any recognizable way—an image no more: not a discrete shape or figure, word, or picture; not a cognitive element or point connected to others along a logical or narrative line. In arriving at legibility, images instead become passages, means of conveyance allowing the mind to move elsewhere.

The notion of comparing the *Passagenwerk* to other work thus seems intrinsic to Benjamin’s image theory itself, just as that theory makes the traditional philological method of comparing “parallel passages” recognizable in a new way. For in considering “parallel places or passages” [*Parallelstellen*] in Hölderlin’s late lyrics and Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk*, another kind of parallelism comes forcibly to mind: a comparison not of patterns but of the piecemeal, of stranded images shorn of syntheses, of straight but interrupted lines. These fragmentary passages are—and, by definition, remain—parallel precisely in the unconventional, literal sense that they share no common point, never cross, complete, or delimit each other. Individual images, passages, or places are instead parallel in Benjamin and Hölderlin because they “move” at a single angle toward something neither attains and because, while individual, they never “are” alone, the one image coming to legibility in the passage of the other, the path of each first recognizable in the movement of the other it traces.

Parallelism of this kind yields no resolution of the movement of comparison it describes, a formal movement which may also be considered historical in that, while remaining self-identical, it brings markedly different moments to recognition with it. The “point” to be made by such a non-synthesizing comparison, while obscured by the fact that it is not one, either in the empirical sense of a discrete solution to an already identified problem, or in the hermeneutic sense of a difficulty of meaning historically resolved, appears clarified, oddly, and thus appropriately enough, in

an unresolved dispute over the identity of a specific species of image in Hölderlin. That genus of image is architectural in reference, and the controversy surrounding it arises in the context of an essay whose main concern is the basis and necessity of literary comparison itself. Both the debate, concerning the validity or invalidity of a certain comparison or parallel, and the analysis, examining the nature of all textual comparisons for which it serves as a powerful example, provide an outline of the enduring philological difficulties that render Hölderlin's images present—recognizable—in the *Passagenwerk*.

In his essay on the methods of literary criticism, "On Philological (Re)cognition (*Erkenntnis*)," Peter Szondi uses a dispute in Hölderlin studies to demonstrate the inappropriateness of cognitive models borrowed from the natural sciences to the "understanding of the poetic word."³ The methodological norm at issue is that of the general rule, which, in the natural sciences, Szondi writes, stipulates, "One time is no time" [*einmal ist keinmal*], or, the individual instance makes no cognitive difference (*HS*, 20). That which is observed once does not count because it cannot "serve as a control" for scientific research, yet what counts as once or twice (or more) in the literary work is, Szondi argues, more difficult to observe (*HS*, 14). The traditional hermeneutic craft of identifying parallel passages begs rather than answers the question of where similarity and recognition begin. For, following the fungible logic of the hermeneutic circle, the pursuit of parallelisms cannot first prove "which facts are capable of proving a parallelism of passages" (*HS*, 25). Is the test case—the "fact" to be compared—the word, the line, the text, the complete work? Can any of these, moreover, even be considered without considering its appearance as itself and as something different—in brief, as metaphor?

The example Szondi gives—the first textual example in the essay—is the architectural language that appears in the first lines of Hölderlin's hymn "Friedensfeier," and the question raised is not only what that language means or describes but whether, in the first place, metaphoric language is involved. The scholarly source of the controversy Szondi focuses on is no less than Friedrich Beissner, editor of the *Großer Stuttgarter Ausgabe* of Hölderlin's complete works, whose rightly venerated, Herculean labors on the "unclean" manuscripts afforded him what one may truly call an unparalleled familiarity with Hölderlin's text. In reference to lines 3–10 of "Friedens-

3. Peter Szondi, "Verstehen des dichterischen Wortes," in *Hölderlin-Studien: Mit einem Traktat über philologische Erkenntnis* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1967), 11; hereafter cited as *HS*.

feier,” beginning “Und gelüftet ist der altgebaute, / Seeliggewohnte Saal . . .,” Szondi cites Beissner as stating that, while “some commentators wish to see in this poetically constructed, elevated space of the encounter with the God a metaphor for a landscape . . . , [w]ere in this language a metaphor intended, so would it stand alone without any prior example in Hölderlin’s entire work” (*HS*, 15).

In contrast to other verses, such as those from “Patmos” and “Brod und Wein,” in which, Beissner argues, a comparison with landscape is clearly stated, “[h]ere [in “Friedensfeier”] a landscape is in no place indicated” (*HS*, 15). Szondi then cites the countercommentary by Beda Alleman at which Beissner has taken aim, which includes the following pertinent lines from “Brod und Wein”: “Festlicher Saal! Der Boden ist Meer! Und Tische die Berge, / Wahrlich zu einzigem Brauche vor alters gebaut!” (*HS*, 15).⁴ The difference, for Beissner, between these verses and the lines in “Friedensfeier,” in which many of the same nouns appear, lies in the direct equations and juxtapositions of architecture and landscape that are presented in “Brod und Wein,” or, in the case of later versions of “Patmos,” another textual example Beissner provides, in the “peaks” [*Gipfeln*] that precede “Tischen” (in “fragrant with a thousand tables”) as that metaphor’s supposedly literal referent (*HS*, 15–16). Neither Beissner nor Szondi mentions that “Greece” is just as directly addressed as “you house of all the heavenly” in “Brod und Wein” (stanza 4, line 1), or that the completed “Patmos” of 1802 already states, “Mit tausend Gipfeln duftend” (line 30). Nor would a citation of the many other architectural terms occurring in these specific poems, or of their innumerable counterparts in nearly all the poems, serve to alter the question at hand. As Szondi formulates it, that question “revolves solely around the recognition of whether in this particular case [stanza 1 of “Friedensfeier”] a metaphor is present or not,” with or without the presence of “developed comparisons and identifications,” and “explicit figures or at least namings” such as are found in other, otherwise comparable poems. Szondi does not attempt to resolve that question but rather raises it to address the issue of the concrete individuality of the literary work. The use of the study of parallel passages to exclude all instances of textual difference would reduce the critical aim of philology to a redundant recognition of the typical. Familiarity with the typical may stem from the study of literary styles, genres, or peri-

4. Michael Hamburger translates these lines as follows: “Festive hall, whose floor is ocean, whose tables are mountains, / Truly, in time out of mind built for a purpose unique!” in *Friedrich Hölderlin: Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), 247.

ods, but it is the atypical and unfamiliar, the arresting or discrepant example, that only a *Literaturwissenschaft* unscientifically blind to its own object would refuse to consider.

Szondi's point—that the exception is the rule in literature—cannot be repeated enough. Still, there is something worth considering in Beissner's own exceptional, categorical insistence that the architectural language of "Friedensfeier," if viewed metaphorically, would "stand alone" in Hölderlin's work, for by the same token it indicates that the innumerable other appearances of architecture *as such* within Hölderlin's texts are not, or only mistakenly, comprehended as metaphors. Just as Szondi begins with the uncertain genus of architectural reference in Hölderlin to indicate an exception to the crisscrossing grounds of comparing "parallel passages," so can the study of such passages begin to move us toward an understanding of their "own" exceptional, textual parallel, Benjamin's *Passagenwerk*. The coincidence of philological and architectural terms is no more accidental here than in Szondi's analysis of the critical task of comparing incomparables, which is to say, no less individual, objective, or concrete.

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In describing what I am calling "architectural history" in Benjamin and Hölderlin, I should begin at the beginning, which, in Hölderlin, is, it appears, the beginning of history. "But when the heavenly or divine have / built . . ." [*Wenn aber die Himmlischen haben / Gebaut . . .*]—these startling first words from one of the "Sketches of Hymns" [*Hymnische Entwürfe*] came upon me in the midst of a long project on architectural form, literature, and philosophy, which, most unlike the perfected work of the divine or even their godlike progeny, the swiftly descending Rhein, had been slowly taking or rather making shape in my reading and teaching over several years, and appears in the juncture of Hölderlin and Benjamin to be nearing its end (*StA*, 2:222).⁵ In every text in which I noted a critical appearance of architectural form, I had never seen the act of building stated in the way it is in Hölderlin's poem, as divine or nonhuman activity undertaken in the past tense. The matter-of-fact quality of that divine construction is underscored by Hölderlin's use throughout the lyrics of the compound neologisms *gottgebaut* or *göttlichgebaut* (as in "Der Rhein" and "An die Madonna"), the translation of a past activity into a present adjective, a single word indicating an existing state of things. In a way I had not previously imagined, the

5. The *Hymnische Entwürfe* date from 1801 to 1806.

built status of certain things in Hölderlin's poetry came to underlie my reading of the *Passagenwerk*, not because both works refer in some fashion to the built (a verbal phenomenon I frequently observed) but because of the necessary and wholly unpredictable connection they espouse between history, or historical understanding, and architectural form. This connection, a "critical point in the movement" traversed within the image for both authors, appeared to me only in reading Hölderlin's late hymns, as I now do, after or in the image of Benjamin. It is with the language of the *Passagenwerk* in mind as their parallel text that the following discussion of passages from the poems should be understood, just as Hölderlin's language underlies the discussion of passages from the *Passagenwerk* with which this analysis concludes.

"Wenn aber die Himmlischen" begins with a statement of the built status of something or some space having something to do with the world. Yet nothing and no place is static and all that is present, rather, relentlessly active, occurring "now" [*jetzt*] in an unceasingly urgent present tense once this poem's narrative opening is concluded—once "the divine have built." This is a present whose insatiable imperfection fails necessarily to discriminate between distinct modes of action. Even the memorialization of unwarranted and unalleviated suffering in the sparest act of poetic recollection—the sudden and unforgettable pronouncement, "But in memory lives Philoctetes"—even this self-enacting statement of the life contained *in* memory (*im Gedächtnis*) is made to appear an insufferable excrescence to the divine subject of reflecting or thinking with whose own present activity the poem unflinchingly concludes: "For the thinking or reflecting God / hates untimely growth" [*Denn es hasset / Der sinnende Gott / Unzeitiges Wachstum*].

The present of "untimely growth" is the ongoing afterlife, or death, of divine or nonhuman architectonics. To return to the beginning of the poem, what happens "now," after the divine have built, is extraordinarily difficult to narrate at all. The epic narrative diction of the opening lines is succeeded not by the continuation of epic narration but by a festering of action of uncertain origin and less certain end, untimely growths upon the earth no more eradicable or purifiable than the shunned Philoctetes' irresolvable wound. Just preceding the shuttling among "useless doings" [*unnütz Treiben*] that the main section of the poem at once describes and imitates—pockets of the present it outlines and leaves unfulfilled—the lines immediately following the stated termination of building weave disorientingly between past and present tenses:

Wenn aber die Himmlischen haben
 Gebaut, still ist es
 Auf Erden, und wohlgestalt stehn
 Die betroffenen Berge. Gezeichnet
 Sind ihre Stirnen. Denn es traf
 Sie, da den Donnerer hielt
 Unzärtlich die gerade Tochter
 Des Gottes bebender Stral
 Und wohl duftet gelöscht
 Von oben der Aufruhr. (*StA*, 2:222)⁶

If the words and spacings of Hölderlin's poems can be considered together to compose a corpus, then these lines, in the context of that body of work, are nothing less than revelatory. On reflection, their severe shifts in verbal tone, tense, and content take on the stark limpidity of a primer in history—a specific kind of history that, because it precedes all humanity, can only be told appropriately, if told at all, with humanly stunning brevity. The heavenly act of building, stated without any qualifying description in the past tense, is, from the start, coupled temporally and contrastively with the description of its present, actual effects: “But when the heavenly have built, still is it on earth and well formed stand the affected mountains” [*Wenn aber die Himmlischen haben / Gebaut, still ist es / Auf Erden, und wohlgestalt stehn / Die betroffenen Berge*]. In Hölderlin, this is about as “well formed,” as Parnassian, as it gets: the perfect, apparently effortless dactylic meter, the smoothly interwoven pattern of assonance, the echoing intonation of plain, considered language could make these lines a memorable poem in themselves, Hölderlin's alternative to Goethe's equally brief “Over all mountain tops is quiet” [*Über allen Gipfeln / Ist Ruh*]. And although the enchanting stillness extended to the reader in Goethe's final line—“Soon you will be quiet too” [*Bald ruhst Du auch*—is, finally, an unmistakable invitation, in the most lovely of lyric guises, to death, there is no *du* to succumb to and be quieted by the exquisite form and sound of Hölderlin's verse. This is a Parnassus no person scales, contemplates, or even nears: When the heavenly, without further humanized definition, and certainly without human company, have built, when building is completed, what is, is stillness, the absolute

6. But when the heavenly have / built, still is it / on earth, and well formed stand / the affected mountains. Marked / are their faces [or foreheads, or brows]. For it struck / them, in that the straight daughter / of the God, the shuddering ray / held the Thunderer without tenderness / and the uproar, extinguished, came down from above as fragrance.

absence of all human—and even all characteristically Hölderlinian—conversation.⁷ And what stands, “well formed,” as the effect of building, is no temple of nature or of art, let alone habitation, but bald-faced mountains, *Berge*. I say bald-faced because, according to the poem’s next word and verse sentence, but still within the same verse line, that is precisely what they are not: “and well formed stand / the affected mountains. Marked / are their faces [foreheads or brows]” [*und wohlgestalt stehn / Die betroffenen Berge. Gezeichnet / Sind ihre Stirnen*]. This marked, drawn, or sign-bearing state (*Gezeichnet*) appears to pertain to the mountains’ already announced status as “well formed” until we encounter, in the next word and verse sentence, for the first and only times in the poem, simple preterite forms stating a prior, direct act of causation: “For it struck them . . .” [*Denn es traf / Sie*]. While that striking or hitting is blunt, unequivocal, the structure of *its* origin and aftermath is anything, as Hölderlin might write, *but*. Although the current standard English translation makes a different line of “it,” substituting a divinely arbitrated family drama for the well-formed antecedent mountains, the genealogy sketched out *grammatically* in the words following *Berge* is, as far as I can tell, as follows: “For it struck them [that is, the mountains] because the straight or direct daughter of the God, shuddering ray, held the Thunderer” [*Denn es traf Sie / da den Donnerer hielt / Unzärtlich die gerade Tochter / Des Gottes bebender Stral*]. Thunder and lightning, one might say, the latter “holding,” or arresting, the former merely by virtue of occurring faster, a straight but shuddering stream of light, daughter of the God, arrest-

7. In an important essay, to which I will return later, Roman Jakobson takes issue with Heidegger’s invocation of Hölderlin (in the *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*) to equate Being and language with being “in conversation”; see Roman Jakobson, *Hölderlin. Klee. Brecht. Zur Wortkunst dreier Gedichte* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976), 83. Jakobson looks specifically at poetry produced by Hölderlin during his “Umnachtung,” the “fall into madness” that itself became a matter of controversy with the hypothesis of the poet’s conscious self-masking by Pierre Bertaux. Characteristic of that long period was Hölderlin’s inability or refusal to engage in the “give-and-take” of conversation, a symptom of which was taken to be his spoken and written adoption of the pseudonym “Scardanelli” (brilliantly unscrambled by Jakobson to reveal the last seven letters of “Hölderlin”). See Jakobson, 31–32; on “Gespräch,” see 63–66. See also Peter Szondi, “Interpretationsprobleme: Hölderlin . . .,” in *Einführung in die literarische Hermeneutik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975), 193–216 (esp. 197). The “need” for conversation—“The arousal of thoughts in conversation and letter is necessary to artists” (Letter to Böhlendorff, end of Nov. 1802 [*StA*, 6:433])—is coupled with a recognition of its inadequacy or unavailability across Hölderlin’s formal and informal utterances. See Thomas Ryan, *Hölderlin’s Silence* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), in which a “move away from the communicative moment of language” is persuasively presented as the dominant characteristic of the work from the beginning (74).

ing sound: This “untender” event unfolds backward in time as what “struck them.” By a kind of reverse ripple effect, “them” [*sie*], too, then unfolds backward in reference as the mountains so struck, marked—before the cause of that marking is stated—on their already apparent faces. Like thunder and lightning, the grammatical positions of object and subject are intertwined in the mountains—“*marked are their faces*”—just as the consequence of an act, stated in the nominative, has preceded the telling of its transitive event. And in the course of proceeding forward by way of unfolding backward—the course of ruined time now recognizable to us from Benjamin, as imaged in his well-known reading of the image of the *Angelus Novus*—this strange or untoward genealogy in the heavens produces the earth of human senses: “And the uproar extinguished came down from above as fragrance” [*Und wohl duftet gelöscht / Von oben der Aufruhr*].

Fragrance, colors, heat and cold, growth—all these and more appear in the poem in the wake of that concisely convoluted history, all aftereffects of the uproar that marked mountains which, it bears repeating, have already been stated to be so marked by their earlier verse placement. Still, this convulsed history (or imaged *Konvolut*) of the origin of sensory experience remains quite apart from the formal stillness of “when the heavenly have built.” That apartness is the mere punctuation and space separating *Berge* from *Gezeichnet sind ihre Stirne*; but the warm depths and cool winds, roses and envious weeds, the islands and bounded waters, error in the garden, fire, particular sense, anger, poetry, interpretation—in brief, “the breast” [*der Brust*] and the “faces of men” [*Stirnen der Männer*—these compose the posthistory, if ever for Hölderlin they could amount to history, of the accomplished fact of nonhuman building. Inasmuch as the first sentence of this poem could be, in itself, a poem (if its last line did not end with, or were not divided by, another beginning [*Gezeichnet*]), so the next countervailing, backward-glancing occurrence of the word *but*, preceded now not by a prior *when* but, precisely, by *now* (*jetzt*)—so this *but* introduces the equally concise counterpoem to the opening poem of divine building, a forward-glancing *Entwurf* of present life, of “it” on earth: “But now it blooms / In poor places. / And wonderfully great / It wishes to stand” [*Jetzt aber blüht es / Am armen Ort. / Und wunderbar gross will / Es stehen*].

This is the world of “places,” of the senses, of wishes, experience, and remembrance, the world in which memorializing poetry intervenes, marking it as different from it but still never climbing the “inaccessible stairs” [*unzugängliche Treppen*] backward to “when the divine have built,” that act of building now reified in the imagination as “a heavenly fortress”

[*himmlischer Burg*] from which the mountains themselves pull far away [*An unzugänglichen Treppen, wenn von himmlischer Burg / Die Berge fernhinziehen*].⁸ And “gone” [*hin*] with the formerly well-formed mountains is the prior time of their forming, a time that, inaccessible to imaging, is instead ascribed, by nominal, synecdochic association, to a distant, demigod-like geometer: “and gone are the times of Pythagoras.”

Gone, inaccessible, and interminably present: The “uproar” of that nonhuman architectural history extinguished, “it” is reenacted on earth in the images of demigods, traditional and invented, epic actors, unnamed travelers, women, men—historical beings from whom history springs. Yet the past act spelled out in the opening of the poem does not give rise to the myriad histories from which it stands apart. Hölderlin refuses both not to state that other, oddly architectural history as fact *and* to ground the histories of images, the earth of poetry, upon it. The *Entwurf* closest to “Wenn aber . . .,” “Ihr sichergebauten Alpen,” makes this double refusal clear.⁹ While references to the built components of what we call nature (and

8. While analysis of the architectonic in Hölderlin is scarce, the literature on the “places” of sensual nature spreads richly across the scholarship. See esp. Romano Guardini, *Form und Sinn der Landschaft in den Dichtungen Hölderlins* (Stuttgart and Tübingen: Rainer Wunderlich, 1946); Hans Frey, *Dichtung, Denken und Sprache bei Hölderlin* (Zürich: Walter Kunz, 1951); Paul de Man, “Hölderlin’s Riddle,” in *Critical Writings, 1953–1978*, ed. Lindsay Waters (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); Wolfgang Binder, *Hölderlin-Aufsätze* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1970); Rainer Nägele, *Text, Geschichte und Subjektivität in Hölderlins Dichtung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1985); Dieter Henrich, *Der Gang des Andenkens* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1986); Kalász, *Hölderlin*; Anke Bennholdt-Thomsen, “Das topographische Verfahren bei Hölderlin und in der Lyrik nach 1945,” in *Hölderlin und die Moderne*, ed. Gerhard Kurz, Valérie Lawitschka, Jürgen Wertheimer (Tübingen: Attempto, 1995), 300–22; and Thomas Schröder, *Poetik als Naturgeschichte: Hölderlins fortgesetzte Säkularisation des Schönen* (Lüneberg: Klampen, 1995).

While Henrich, Bennholdt-Thomsen, and others find in landscape the basis of memory, Kalász speaks of nature instead as “sedimented history” (94), and Nägele describes a “disappearing of the sensory-empirical world” when “that which has happened becomes history, in that it is removed from the apparent immediacy of the sensory into the horizon of meaning” (42–43). Heidegger’s complex representation of Hölderlin in relationship to the earth, while opposed directly to the notion of (the beautiful) landscape (compare Schröder), exerts a marked influence on the topographical criticism, beginning with Guardini and Frey and developed by Binder. It is recalled, from the “angle” of the nonsensory place, in Hent de Vries, “‘Winke’: Divine Topoi in Hölderlin, Heidegger, Nancy,” in *The Solid Letter: Readings of Friedrich Hölderlin*, ed. Aris Fioretos (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 94–120.

9. In the most substantial discussion I have found of “Ihr sichergebauten Alpen,” which also focuses to a greater degree on the language of the architectonic than any analysis I

which Hölderlin calls “walls,” “steps,” “floors,” “tables,” “bridges,” “palaces,” “towers,” “gates,” “columns,” “streets,” and “windows”) serve as reminders of divine architectonics and are a consistent presence in the poems, “Ihr sichergebauten Alpen” renders the break between this architecture and sensory-temporal experience unbridgeable, except by the break, the absence of a bridge, itself, the absolute stillness produced negatively by an *unlimited caesura*. Following the poem’s opening apostrophe and first line—“You securely built Alps” [*Ihr sichergebauten Alpen*—is a single, simple word, *Die*, whose identity as relative pronoun or article (*which* or *the*) cannot now or ever be determined, since it is followed, syntactically and grammatically, by no other word. The first two lines of the poem in their entirety read, “Ihr sichergebauten Alpen / Die,” and the poem may as well end right there. Insofar as the securely built and permanently unpredicated Alps go, it indeed does. They are made to stand—apart. For what follows the linear, spatial, and verbal break after “Die” is a conjunction—“And” [*Und*—bearing no relation back to the architectonic things apostrophized. Added onto nothing, that conjunction leads instead into one of the most explicitly erotic landscapes in all of Hölderlin’s verse, a description which takes the “fragrance” that descends in “Wenn aber . . .” to extraordinary sensory depths, or, if one prefers, heights:

Und ihr sanftblikenden Berge,
 Wo über buschigem Abhang
 Der Schwarzwald saust,
 Und Wohlgerüche die Locke
 Der Tannen herabgießt,
 Und der Nekar (StA, 2:231)¹⁰

have encountered of any of the poems, Binder presents a very different view of the function of the built within it (*Hölderlin-Aufsätze*, 327–50). While asserting, in a striking manner reminiscent of Beissner (see note 2), that “the status of being built” [*das Gebautsein*] ascribed to the mountains is by no means a metaphor—“it is not meant metaphorically; the mountains do not stand there as if they were built, rather, they are really built” (333)—Binder, unlike Beissner, proceeds to make the mountains over into images of Being, “the metaphysical form of reality or the essence of Being” (335), before shifting from Being to the Fatherland—“The mountain range . . . is built like the Fatherland—like itself” (337), and concluding with the predictable transition from “homeland” [*Heimat*] to dwelling, according to Heidegger, in Hölderlin: “In the ‘occurrence’ of linguistic achievement arises the homeland, its space, its life and its familiarity . . . for ‘most deserving, yet poetically, man dwells on this earth’” (349).

10. And you softly looking mountains, / where over bushy incline / the Black Forest whistles, / and the curl of the fir trees / pour down perfumes / And the Neckar

The objects of this overflowing sexual world are so organic as to be organlike: A less architectonic, a livelier corporal landscape would be hard to image for the human eye. As the poem's history of the senses progresses, moving from sight to sound, and from a projection of erotic life on earth to the projection of the speaker's own death—"And Stuttgart, where I / One of the momentary buried / May lie . . ." [*Und Stuttgart, wo ich / Ein Augenblicklicher begraben / Liegen dürfte . . .*]

—another conjunction (*Und*) appears, similarly broken off from what came before, but followed in space this time by a direct address of cities: "Ihr guten Städte!" (*StA*, 2:231). Echoing the opening apostrophe of the divinely built, this second address makes that building appear—absent, both "secure" in itself and discontinuous with all else. Finally, the verbal recollection of the architectonic is reenacted in the form of its own disappearance, as the poem, turning now to an explicitly *historicized*, sensory world—"And sounding Roman things, the Spitzberg curves out, and perfume" [*Und Römisches tönend, ausbeuget der Spizberg / Und Wohlgeruch*]

—breaks off on the same unpredicated, double relative pronoun/article construction with which its opening halted abruptly—"And Till's Valley, which / the" [*Und Tills Thal, das*] (*StA*, 2:232). Here the built world and the lived world share a broken grammatical structure but absolutely no history, no marking event—not even by dint of linear word placement or the syntactic necessity of proceeding by reading backward. Related to it only by the text that maintains their separation, nonhuman architecture still haunts human experience in this poem, just as the poem imposes a kind of phantom history on its reader, the time spent traversing—or not traversing—the still, blank space between them. If the difference between being well formed and bearing a marked brow—between "wohlgestalt . . . betroffenen Berge" and "Gezeichnet sind ihre Stirne"—could itself be imagined as a history, it would "resemble" the time of that traversal between divine architectonics and historical image production, a time that takes no visible shape in space at all.

While the "sketch" "Ihr sichergebauten Alpen" emphatically abbreviates and interrupts the eccentric architectural history of "Wenn aber," the image of the river "Rhein," as one might guess, extends and prolongs it. Moving continuously between "göttlichgebaute" mountains and the cities it "founds" [*gründet*] beneath them, this "noblest of currents" [*edelster der Ströme*] and "demigod" [*Halbgott*] of the long, completed hymn bearing its name in fact merely expands for wider human consumption the image of its unearthly prototype, ray of light, daughter of the God, whose arresting of sound leaves signs on what the heavenly have built into the sky and a

sensuous life of sense making on the earth below (*StA*, 2:142–48). Such intermediary “half” or hybrid figures appear frequently, yet, strictly speaking, unidentifiably, in Hölderlin’s work. Classical and local people and places, but also people “placed” and places “peopled,” each serves as an unresting conjunction, a two-part or two-sided locus classicus always partly of the poet’s own making: “At the fig tree my Achilles died to me” (*StA*, 2:196).¹¹ Set in an imaged world whose history originates in a break with a world no human history accounts for, a world constructed—rather than created—by the nonhuman, the mediation effected by these figures remains half-way, arrested, set apart. Marked as the subject, marked as the object of experience, their internal incoherence is also external, like that of a mountain struck with a face, or like sound incongruously stopped from transpiring by the fixing power of vision, the appearance of light. This is the “poetic view of history” of which Hölderlin once wrote, juxtaposing rather than identifying that vision with what he called “the architectonic of the heavens.” In a letter of 12 March 1804 to Leo von Seckendorf, who would later publish “Der Rhein” (1808), he describes his current occupation as follows: “Die Fabel, poëtische Ansicht der Geschichte, und Architektonik des Himmels beschäftigt mich gegenwärtig vorzüglich” (*StA*, 4:437).¹² Since Hölderlin lists three subjects of *beschäftigt*, yet conjugates the verb in the singular, as if all three composed together some one thing, a necessarily infelicitous translation of the sentence would read: “The fable, poetic view of history, and architectonic of the sky or heavens most occupies me at present.”¹³

11. The many potential dualities of both place and person in this apparently direct, always immediately powerful line from “Memosyne”—intratextual and intertextual possibilities of significance that at once extend their “echo” indefinitely and render memory fictive, even before the poem, in ending, declares “mourning” a failure—have been persuasively analyzed by Anselm Haverkamp, in *Laub voll Trauer: Hölderlins späte Allegorie* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1991), 49–70.

12. Beissner’s commentary on the phrase is limited to a citation concerning “das Gewitter . . . des Himmels” from the undated letter (#240) to Casimir Ulrich Böhlendorff written (Beissner estimates in the second half of November 1802) following Hölderlin’s return from France. Containing the phrase that has endowed his undefined experience in France with enduring hermeneutic mystery—“as one says of heroes later, I can certainly say that Apollo struck me”—the letter goes on to describe Hölderlin’s attempt “to fix myself” [*mich festzusetzen*] in the “study” of the “nature at home” [*heimatliche Natur*], beginning with “Das Gewitter. . . .” See *StA*, 4:432–33; on the letter to Böhlendorff, see Szondi, *Einführung*, 208–12.

13. An extensive examination of this passage in the letter to Seckendorf is offered by Gerhard Kurz, in “Winkel und Quadrat: Zu Hölderlins später Poetik und Geschichtsphilosophie,” in *Hölderlin und die Moderne*, 280–99. The displacement and interpretation of the

The “poetic view of history”—the view, I suggest, both of Benjamin’s theory of “truly historical images” in the *Passagenwerk* and of the lyric passages cited above—occupies a paratactic, unsubordinated position between fable and architectonics of the sky, between the stories and personae of myth, literature, religion, and ancient and modern history, and their absolute absence, the unearthly building of the world, the nonhuman *factum* from which these stories of sensuality and struggle explosively, lightninglike, descend. *Factum* and not *dictum*: Building is a kind of articulation, but in building, the gods do anything *but* speak the world into being. The world of nonhuman building is no architectonic paradise, a work of transparent relations within which all difference is proportionally contained: The “abyss” [*Abgrund*] that encircles the Alps—the “peaks of time” [*Gipfel der Zeit*—in “Patmos” is spanned precariously by “lightly built bridges” [*leichtgebaute Brücken*], and the “walls” [*Wänden*] of “palaces built by the gods” [*göttlichgebaute Paläste*] are no less “unapproachable” [*unzugangbaren*]

architectonic Kurz’s otherwise helpful investigation effects is instructive in itself and well worth reviewing at length. After citing the letter in its entirety, Kurz easily equates “fable” with “poetic view of history” but makes no mention of the inclusion of “architectonic of the heavens” directly after them, nor of the shared status of all three as subject of a verb conjugated in the singular (286). As Kurz recounts, the openly stated motive of the letter was to seek subscribers to a series of annotated landscape engravings entitled “Ansichten des Rheins” to be published by Friedrich Wilmans, the publisher of Hölderlin’s *Trauerspiele des Sophokles* (1804) and, later, *Nachtgesänge* (1805). Hölderlin himself does not appear to have been a subscriber to the pictorial images, nor did Seckendorf reply to his request (285). In speculating to Seckendorf on how the pictures might turn out, however, Hölderlin freely remarked, “So much depends on the angle within the work of art and the quadrat outside it” (280). Kurz esteems that with the words “angle within the work of art” Hölderlin had in mind “the perspectival structure of the work of art,” whose historical and theoretical development Kurz reviews (289–90). But he admits he is at a loss to understand the notion of a “quadrat outside” the artwork, suggesting that “Hölderlin may have misunderstood something in this formulation” and used it mistakenly to mean the “frame” of the perspectival work (290). It is only in this context that Kurz recalls the (now diegetically misplaced) phrase “architectonic of the heavens,” “of which,” he states incorrectly, “Hölderlin speaks later in the letter” (291), before subsuming the phrase within “the traditional image of heavenly architecture,” whose history, like that of perspectival painting, he then resumes. While Kurz ends by citing the use of *Winkel* and the related term *Spitze* to describe places in some of the poems (including a brief mention, on that basis, of “Ihr sichergebauten Alpen”), in severing the “architectonic of the heavens” both from its place in Hölderlin’s sequence of thought within the letter and what Kurz calls the “geometric imagination” of the poetry, his exposition in effect renders it the “quadrat outside” the image, a notion that must indeed appear incomprehensible if one views a “rational” imagery of nature to replace, picturelike, the “poetic view of history” in Hölderlin (294, 290).

for their divine origin in that poem (*StA*, 2:165–72). Nor does the built world express a humanly imagined divinity: The only poem in which architecture and expressivity are explicitly linked—in which “spirit, orderly columns,” and a centralized plan are said to “shine” in “God’s work of expressive building” [*in Gottes Werk / Ausdrücklicher Bauart*]¹⁴—is, notably, “Der Vatikan” (*StA*, 2:252–53). By contrast, building done by unidentified divinities has no basis in any institutionalized order: If organized, it is on principles as unlike the Vatican’s as are the Alps. And, finally, even if the world or sky of their building could be judged perfect from some inaccessible point of view, the nonhuman or divine do not see it that way, do not share in this putative transparency. They, too, Hölderlin notes, “need” “markers” to “indicate *their way*” within it; the architectonic of the heavens, once passed through, if only by the heavenly, results in the experience of discontinuity whose very signposts become the text of a “poetic view of history”: “The heavenly . . . are in need of a fence or a signpost that indicates their way” [*Die Himmlischen eines Zauns oder Merkmals / Das ihren Weg / Anzeige . . . / Bedürfen*] (*StA*, 2:223).

The heavenly, or nonhuman, have built, without history, a building from which, *nongenealogically*, all histories, all stories, spring, as surely as, after an indefinable separation, the word *Gezeichnet* follows the word *Berge*, the syntactically prior effect of a cause only recognizable as such by looking backward. The heavenly, or nonhuman, who build without history do not *reside* divinely within that building: No Vatican, these mountains are also no Olympus. What the divine have built is an architecture of passage in which no one resides, inasmuch as no one can level for their habitation the peaks of time. The “indications” or signs they “need” mark not an impossible appropriation of that built world but rather a passage through it, for, unlike a perfumed, curving landscape, one cannot “place” oneself within a construct whose component parts include the “abyss” or space separating discrete and unscalable forms of time.

The word *indication* (*Anzeige*) appears at the conclusion of a little analyzed *Entwurf* that refuses—quite literally flatly refuses—to attribute sensuous meaning and history not to the heavenly but to the life of men and women.¹⁴ The point of view taken in this lyric reverses that of *Wenn aber*

14. This refusal appears all the more remarkable in that the “sketch” was written down by Hölderlin on a letter he received from Susette Gotard. It was first published by Carl Viëtor, in his remarks on the fourth edition of her letters. See Beissner, *StA*, 2:841–42: “Auf der Rückseite des Briefes der Diotima vom <5. März 1800> . . . Erster Druck . . . Carl Viëtor in ‘Anmerkungen zu den Briefen von Diotima’ (Beilage zum vierten Druck der Januspresse: Die Briefe von Diotima <Leipzig 1920>, S. 17).”

die Himmlischen—it looks up from earth to sky—but the thing so viewed, or so revealed, is astonishingly, breathtakingly, the same. The very ambition engaged in suggesting, in indicating, such an identity is appropriately belied by the utter plainness, the calm and economy, of the poem's diction. For only with apparent modesty could one state the exchange of matter and the divine that appears momentarily at the close of this poem.

In "Was ist der Menschen Leben," the appearance of the sky as building material, all color and relation to the cycles of organic life washed away, is called an "indication" of "infinity," of "riches." I cite this brief poem, first published well over a century after its writing, in its entirety:

Was ist der Menschen Leben? ein Bild der Gottheit.
 Wie unter dem Himmel wandeln die Irrdischen alle, sehen
 Sie diesen. Lesend aber gleichsam, wie
 In einer Schrift, die Unendlichkeit nachahmen und den Reichtum
 Menschen. Ist der einfältige Himmel
 Denn reich? Wie Blüthen sind ja
 Silberne Wolken. Es regnet aber von daher
 Der Thau und das feuchte. Wenn aber
 Das Blau ist ausgelöscht, das Einfältige, scheint
 Das Matte, das dem Marmelstein gleicht, wie Erz,
 Anzeige des Reichtums. (*StA*, 2:209)¹⁵

Contradicting, from the outset, all given sense of the divine, the poem begins with a dictum as heretical in meaning as its form is orthodox, the indication of an undefined relation and separation between not mortals and the one god but the ordinary *life* of men and women (*Menschen*) and the godly *as image*. It ends with the image of the sky as marble stone, the appearance or shining of a nonreflective object, "the matt," buried and unalloyed, "like ore." Once the blue surface that colors and covers the sky by the natural *trompe l'oeil* of light is erased, the "uniform," phenomenal effect of a reflection gives way to the matter of form, an "indication of riches." This is as close as the earthly may get to viewing the infinity they "imitate," as if reading in a writing. Or rather, this may be as close as the poet gets, or writing gets, or—looking forward to Benjamin by looking, with Benjamin, backward—as close

15. What is the life of people? an image of divinity. As under the sky the earthly all wander, they see this [the sky]. But as if reading, as in a writing, people imitate the infinity and the riches. Is the uniform sky, then, rich? Like blossoms, of course, are silver clouds. Yet it rains from there thaw and damp. But when the blue is erased, the uniform, appears [or shines] the matt, that is like marblestone, like ore, indication of riches.

as reading in a writing gets to viewing that which in the image is not imaged, which is not visually fixed: the passage or “critical point of movement within [the image]” that, in Benjamin, is nothing less than history, and in Hölderlin’s writing may as well image divinity. For nothing could be more incommensurable with infinity, *or with the life of men and women*, than an image, just as nothing could be more incommensurable with the uninformative blue that must be effaced by concrete—stony or petrified—imaging in this poem than the “lieblicher Bläue” “into which the metal roof of the church spire . . . blooms” in the prose poem of the same name (*StA*, 2:372–74). Written by an admirer, visitor, and early biographer of the “mad” poet in the persona of the Hölderlin-like hero of his novel,¹⁶ and as defacing a piece of ventriloquism as hero-worship need ever aspire to, “In lieblicher Bläue,” with its buildings blooming like flowers, “columns” resembling “trees,” “open heaven,” “purity” of “beauty,” and protestations of humility before “simple,” “holy” “images,” contains, of course, the famous lines canonized by Heidegger and incanted ever since: “full of deserving, yet poetically, man resides on earth” [*voll Verdienst, doch dichterisch, wohnt der Mensch auf der Erde*].¹⁷ But it also contains the deservedly unremembered definition of the pious subject who so resides: “man, who is called an image of divinity” [*der Mensch, der heißt ein Bild der Gottheit*]. As the convulsions of history—in this case literary and philosophical history—would have it, a lately enshrined, terribly empathetic imitation of a deified poet’s work, an “untimely growth” as deserving as any of divine hatred, brings the imaging of divinity and imitation of infinity in “Was ist der Menschen Leben” most starkly into view, into the present. It is as if, looking forward by looking backward, we can only *now* read in the lan-

16. Beissner classifies “In lieblicher Bläue” as “dubious,” stating, “It is nonetheless dubious whether [Waiblinger] copied Hölderlin’s words letter for letter, whether he did not expand and prettify them in some places, whether he did not also contaminate different poems” (*StA*, 2:991).

17. Wilhelm Waiblinger’s novel *Phäton*, including “In lieblicher Bläue,” appeared in Stuttgart in 1823, and while a travesty of Hölderlin’s “late” works in particular is strikingly apparent in Waiblinger’s prose text, the history of the “reception” of “In lieblicher Bläue” has been defined more by one’s reception of Heidegger, or of Heidegger’s view of Hölderlin, than by any criteria of “authenticity,” let alone of “ownness” [*das Eigene*], especially in Hölderlin’s sense. On Heidegger on Hölderlin, and the nondialectical relationship of “own” to “foreign” in Hölderlin’s thinking “about” the Greeks, i.e., as already in nondialectical, or illegible relationship to Egypt, see Andrzej Warminski, *Readings in Interpretation: Hölderlin, Hegel, Heidegger* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); and “Monstrous History: Heidegger Reading Hölderlin,” in *The Solid Letter*, ed. Aris Fioretos (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 201–14.

guage of this writing a true cause from a false effect. And if that effect has been the burial of this long-buried poem's destruction of all traditional genealogies of the image—as finite imitation, human expression, or divine creation—then its truly historical cause, its origin, may be “the life of people”—(space)—“an image of divinity,” when no image but that of a flat, colorless surface is left to be read, a surface of the kind gods build with, indicating pure depth.

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Still looking forward by looking backward, it is now, perhaps, time to suggest that Benjamin's *Passagenwerk* transcribes—“as in a writing”—Hölderlin's sky. In Benjamin's thoroughly humanly built world, a hybrid, marbled architectonics that appears to house even the heavens, images of people may instead appear (after or across an unfathomable separation) the life of the divine. “As if”—across an infinitely empty or full, an un(re)cognized expanse of time—human and nonhuman had exchanged places, the building of Benjamin's nineteenth-century Paris and the building of Hölderlin's heavens come to legibility as each other's dialectical images. The “wandering” of “the earthly” and “riches” of the “sky,” the surface and depth building literalizes, are turned “inside” out, the one impossibly containing, the other impossibly contained within, an abyss of historical images. Treating words and objects as equally concrete materials, the *Passagenwerk* attempts to contain and display the central, earthbound “place” of a century with such a surfeit of surfaces as to yield a nearly physical impression, a “stamp” of the time (*GS*, 5:578). Hölderlin's sketches image building as “indications” of an “architectonic of the sky,” an objectivity separated from subjective, historical experience by a gulf only measurable in “peaks of time.” Between Hölderlin's images of building abstracted from historical experience and Benjamin's *Passagen* built of material historicity there “exists” exactly that absolute absence of “continuity” by which, according to Benjamin, “a piece of the past can be struck by actuality,” a discontinuity as unnegotiable as the difference between life and image, human and divine, a difference whose own imaging must be “ambiguous” or, in Hölderlin, only present by “half,” exactly because it is historical in Benjamin's sense.¹⁸ If

18. “For a piece of the past to be struck by actuality, no continuity may exist between them” (*PW*, N7,7); “Ambiguity is the imaged appearance of the dialectic, the law of the dialectic in standstill” (“Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” *GS*, 5:55). One could say that, with the exception of the “stillness on earth,” “when the heavenly have built” and moun-

Hölderlin's "poetic view of history" has never appeared more present than in its dialectical relationship to the *Passagenwerk* "now," the singularly prosaic, citational composition intended to "win for an age" the "extreme concreteness" of "building" and "children's games," it is not last because every passage of Benjamin's "unparalleled" work appears to negate even the possibility of such a "poetic" past, the imaging of any concrete object whose face is not already marked.¹⁹

The consumer good, the crowd, the library, museums, technology, train stations, mechanized industry, Proust, Baudelaire, Balzac, Bréton, Saint-Simon, Engels, Marx, Adorno on Benjamin, Bloch: Benjamin's passages contain the inside and outside of the *Pariser Passagen*, the concrete objects the arcades display *and* the concrete history that has produced them. This means that iron construction and barricades, materialist social theory and world fairs, the metro, wax mannequins, Baudelaire's flaneur and Balzac's César Birotteau (among countless others) all count equally within the *Passagenwerk* as "images" containing the movement of history within them. They are the "waste of history" transcribed (literally, "history falling away" [*Abfall der Geschichte*]), transferred from temporal oblivion to "convolutes" on paper (*PW*, N2,6). Perusing Benjamin's uncircumscribable project we are more likely to remember the verbal archive of Bouvard et Pécuchet than the original factum of divine architectonics, just as few human constructs could be less reminiscent of the *göttlichgebaut* than the rapidly outmoded commercial arcades themselves. For while both the *Passagenwerk* and its architectonic namesake store, neither memorializes: They will never contain the image of "my Achilles, died to me at a fig tree," or even of Ajax, "dead in a foreign place" [*in der Fremd*] (*PW*, N2,6; *StA*, 2:96). The poetic history which follows upon building in Hölderlin is not housed among the images of history in Benjamin.

Still, the fact that it is nearly impossible to arrive at a theoretical description of the effect of the *Passagenwerk*, which does not adumbrate the lightninglike descriptions given by Benjamin himself, raises, but perhaps also begs, the question of which proposition is more profane: that the life

tains have not yet been "marked" with "faces," no line in Hölderlin fails to indicate it is half of something, and that if it is present, its other half is, has been, or will be missing. The striking frequency of the prefix *un* brings that indication of a present absence down to the level of the word, while Hölderlin's crystalline "swan" poem, "Die Hälfte des Lebens" ("The Half of Life"), spells out that negation of one by one in two perfectly symmetrical, perfectly devastating seven-line stanzas.

19. GS, 5:1091, Letter to Scholem, 15 March 1929.

of men and women might itself be thought an image, an image, even more redoubtably, unimaginably, of the nonhuman, or the divine; or that the life of the divine—in itself a barely conceivable proposition, but one perhaps best imagined, if at all, as the near opposite of the human fiction of divine life—that the so-called life of the divine, be thought in images made of and by men and women, images necessarily housed in an architecture in which everything shines, or appears, and nothing human lives, and apparent riches are indications of anything but the stuff of building, let alone “like ore.”

What is, after all, the commodity displayed in the architectonic, historical world of the nineteenth-century arcade, and, analogously, what is the verbal artifact housed in the critical, historical construction of the *Passagenwerk*? And how do we “wander”—in Hölderlin’s words—“as beneath the sky,” through this architectonic of time “now”? “The wandering that we do through arcades is also fundamentally a way of ghosts, along which doors give way and walls soften” (*PW*, L2,7). Yet in order for present wandering to be also the path of phantoms, of the present past, the formal limits of building, the doors and walls of past construction, must be passed through. Just as “the poetic view of history” is apposite in Hölderlin to the “architectonic of the heavens or sky” because, built by gods, that construction remains visible, as if legible, and separated from the life of men on earth, so the view of history apposite in Benjamin to the dialectical image, the image that is “identical with the historical object” (*PW*, N10a,3), is visible, as if legible, in the essentially historical world of architecture, architecture which, in opposition to the organicist, or in Benjamin’s terms, reconstructionist myth of history as “the appearance of the always-the-same” [*den Schein des Immer-Gleichen*] (*PW*, N9,5) is “altmodisch” in its very newness, historical in its actual existence (*PW*, K1a,4). Intended for specific temporal purposes, the infinite variety of creeds, consumer goods, and commodities it must by definition outlive, building bears the discontinuity between past and present on its “brow,” as well as in its interior, or “breast,” just as the arcades, produced by humans and, like humans, effaceable, make inside and outside fully interchangeable. The arcades realize Benjamin’s critical image of the image as invertible sock or glove, but they do so as ambient reality, as architectural-historical form: “The interior steps outside. . . . The room becomes street and the street becomes room” [*Das Intérieur tritt nach aussen. . . . Das Zimmer wird Strasse und die Strasse wird Zimmer*] (*PW*, L1,5);²⁰ “Passages are houses or ways which have no outside . . .

20. —or, the textual “stanza” (“room”) becomes “passage.”

like dreams" [*Passagen sind Häuser oder Gänge, welche keine Aussen-seite haben . . . wie der Traum*] (PW, L1a,1). One builds to live in the street, an elsewhere that is also built. And in these passageways one sees "time" materially dehistoricized, "secularized in space" (PW, N8a,4): buildings like *Bilder*, in which "the most heterogeneous temporal elements stand . . . next to each other" [*die heterogensten Zeitelemente stehen . . . nebeneinander*]; buildings like "mountains of time" [*Zeitberg(e)*] rising into view (PW, M9,4).

The relation and separation (in Benjamin, the tension [*Spannung*]) between the image of building as *altmodisch* or dated "Zeitberge," and thus of the architectonic itself as "historical index" (PW, N3,1), and Hölderlin's *göttlichgebaute* "Gipfel der Zeit," the ineffaceable architecture of the nonhistorical—that tension or dialectic composes, or in Benjamin's terms, makes "legible" the "truth" of "the poetic view of history" that is Hölderlin's *Passagenwerk*. For this view poses the question, "What is the life of people," and, passing across the blank space (" ") of "secularized time," provides the single answer no history can show: "an image of divinity." And it composes the truth of Benjamin's inhumanly historical view of poetry, his *Dialektik* without change, and so, conversely, *im Stillstand*, the divine or non-human "life" of images standing as things stand "wenn die Himmlischen haben gebaut." "Das Vorstehende," that which came and stands before, and which dialectical images "now" present, is, Benjamin writes, "put another way" [*anders gewendet*]: "the indestructibility of the highest life in all things" [*die Unzerstörbarkeit des höchsten Lebens in allen Dingen*] (PW, N1a,4). In Benjamin and in Hölderlin, what came and stands before is built without correspondence to any lived historical moment, whether of the heavenly or the eternally outmoded petit bourgeois. In this, of course, Benjamin's theory of dialectical images justly stupefied Theodor Adorno, for it is a theory of history to which there is no historical, and thus no transformative, response. In Benjamin, as in Hölderlin, the indestructible, highest life in all things is instead their nonsequential, or still-standing, their "architectural," history, their building, in the concrete appearance of images, of a permanent passage of time.

"This writing down" [*Diese Niederschrift*], writes Benjamin of the transcription of words into the *Passagenwerk*, "was begun under an open sky of cloudless blue" [*ist unter einem freien Himmel begonnen worden, wolkenloser Bläue*] (GS, 5:1058). What blue is this; under what sky does this history begin? Benjamin continues, or appears to: "The painted summer sky that looks down from the arcades into the workroom of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris threw its dreamy, lightless ceiling over the first birth of its

insight" [*Der gemalte Sommerhimmel, der aus Arkaden in den Arbeitsaal der pariser Nationalbibliothek hinuntersieht, hat seine träumerische, lichtlose Decke über die Erstgeburt ihrer Einsicht geworfen*] (GS, 5:1059). True historical insight originates not with the earthly appearance of history transpiring in the open light of day but in a building housing in temporary oblivion a world of fixed images, whose ceiling, or sky, is an arcade.

Yet, then again, what arcade is this; and what images are so housed? Now looking backward by looking forward, just as we can see the arcades invert Hölderlin's architectonics, can we not see Hölderlin in, "Hölderlin" as, an arcade? Compelled to move over and over again, never at home, living as if demonstrating his own poem ("Die Hälfte des Lebens"), Hölderlin spent the "remainder"—over "half"—of his "life" housed by proper strangers in a tower from whose window he reportedly passed time looking at "images." "Hölderlin" the "benighted" poet became less a person than a place, a foreign ruin one could visit without leaving home; no longer conversant, he attracted consumers of his poetry as he had never done before. Fixed in others' minds, as the moving image of a poet who had "outlived himself," "Hölderlin" supplied his visitors with freshly penned poems as souvenirs.²¹ The apparently inferior quality of the verse must have made the request of it seem innocent, even generous, poetic output providing poor payment for the time of an enlightened person's presence, the appropriation of the wares of a madman experienced by the sane as charitable act.

Yet while it is no wonder that the lasting image of "Hölderlin" was formed by others after Hölderlin had ceased to be "Hölderlin," failing or refusing to recognize himself as such, there is some disagreement on the merits of the goods displayed in the arcade, including the verbal objects signed "Scardanelli." Through exhaustive grammatical, lexical, and phonetic analysis of the last such work, Roman Jakobson demonstrated the assertion that it contained no "finished architecture" to be objectively false.²² Compar-

21. It would be difficult to say what, in Hölderlin's long-lived popularity as "madman," is more maddening: his transformation by those of literary leanings into a "live" tourist attraction and object of scientific study across generations; the fact that this seems to have occurred without a hint of self-questioning and with a great deal of self-congratulation; or the freakishly free proclivity felt by his visitors to ask the madman, before departing, for their very own poem. The most remarkable example of such proprietorial comportment is the request by the poet Johann Georg Fischer, made two months before Hölderlin's death, which may have issued in the last poem signed "In your service" [*Mit Unterthänigkeit*], "Scardanelli," and entitled "Der Zeitgeist." In more than one poem from the tower entitled "View" [*Aussicht*], Hölderlin equates seeing with seeing "images" (Szondi, *Einführung*, 196–98).

22. Jakobson, *Hölderlin*, 71.

ing the parts of the poem (“Aussicht,” May/June 1843), word for word and letter for letter, with each other, and then with other parts of other poems, Jakobson makes graphically, visibly evident that the most significant, overarching characteristic of the poems by “Scardanelli” is their “architectonic” structure, their limited lexical palette belying or perhaps even disguising the highly complex formal lines along which their concrete elements are combined.²³ Jakobson compares the “untouchable unity and wholeness” of the poems with the “fragments” of speech with which Hölderlin addressed others at the time of their composition, concluding that “what remains” [*Was aber bleibt*] for the poet may be “language” not as “conversation” but as “poem,” the “overarching rules of verbal sequencing.”²⁴ Whether or not what we read in reading “Scardanelli” is indeed Hölderlin’s achievement of an “architectonics of the sky,” a rich, poetic architecture of prosaic, even matt, appearance, finally fully separated from the “poetic view of history,” and whether it was Hölderlin or “Hölderlin” who became that enduring place of passage, that arcade,²⁵ in which history—national, literary, linguistic, aesthetic, and political—was made visible with concrete specificity, someone or some corpus no longer answering to that name outlived many of the poets who entered history passing through it.²⁶ Like “Greece” in the eyes of Winckelmann or Nietzsche, precisely in having been Hölderlin, “Hölderlin” would have had to be invented by those who came after him.

To some extent, that of our own time, we may be doing the same to Benjamin: “our” Benjamin, as lost “to us” as Achilles dying at the fig tree, the heroic “waste of history” “fallen away” “before” its “natural” epic form; and Benjamin lost, moreover, like Ajax *in der Fremd*, dying apart, at his “own” and an absolutely foreign hand, a heroic shadow of history whose experience of the present is “madness,” but one who never desired a hero’s garb. Their deeds cited in pieces, in phrases “spoken after them” by others, these are heroes in a minor mode—*Höld-er-lin*—lost and housed, like Benjamin, in the same history whose (re)cognition they compose.

Yet if that is what stands before us, it is true to the *Passagenwerk*, too. For in the “lightless” “workroom” of the Bibliothèque Nationale, the painted

23. Jakobson, *Hölderlin*, esp. 71–83.

24. Jakobson, *Hölderlin*, 83.

25. Ironically, the tower housing “Hölderlin” burned down a few decades after Hölderlin’s death; fitting seat of the Hölderlin-Gesellschaft, it has twice been reconstructed, at first enlarged and then returned to its approximate, original dimensions.

26. These include: Fischer (mentioned above), Justinus Kerner, Wilhelm Zimmerman, Bettina von Arnim, Achim von Arnim, Mörike, and, of course, Waiblinger, who, like Achim and Hegel, died over a decade before Hölderlin.

blue heaven is matt, and the riches it indicates are historical objects, images that, in imitation of the infinite, one day, any day, can be read. As in the past, in reading Hölderlin's lyrics, it was Benjamin "before" the *Passagenwerk* who wrote down the insight born into the future by their images: the recognition, according to Benjamin, that for Hölderlin, for poetry, for history, and, as *history will have it*, for Benjamin, "the plastic, indeed architectonic meaning of the sky is infinitely greater than that of the sun" [*Die plastische, ja architektonische Bedeutung des Himmels ist unendlich viel grösser als die der Sonne*] ("Zwei Studien zu Hölderlin," *GS*, 1:36).²⁷

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Between the Registers: The Allegory of Space in Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*

Henry Sussman

1

If anything in the world of literature, of text, may be rightly characterized as a *Thing*, it is surely Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. Not a history, not a treatise; not even strictly a sourcebook, for it also delivers Benjamin's comments, not a work of criticism, in its utter disjointedness, not even, properly, a work. *The Arcades Project* may well be described as a Thing that confronts us in its arbitrariness, its *Geworfenheit*, its Thrownness,¹ its irreducible and irrefutable materiality. Its aggressive repudiation of any prior known or recognized genre qualifies it to be the literary counterpart of an exile. *The Arcades Project* is an uncanny simulacrum, like the dollhouse in Edward Albee's *Tiny Alice*, or like the backup file that my computer, autonomous of my volition, will create of this essay as I compose it, a simulacrum of action taking place simultaneously to its call into Being, in real time, in vir-

1. For the notion of Thrownness, see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 174, 185, 188, 223–25, 232, 234, 295, 321, 329–30, 337, 378, 394, 399, 434–35, 458.

tuality. Over the same thirteen years during which Benjamin's life advances toward its seemingly inevitable annihilation, a life that proceeds by the systematic withdrawal of the socioeconomic and even material underpinnings that made it possible, *The Arcades Project* comes to occupy a space and set of logical, generic, disciplinary representational conditions making it manifestly impossible. The phenomenon of Benjamin and the composition of *The Arcades Project*, whatever it might be, are inseparable. Although Benjamin's progressive loss, to whatever degree of his own connivance, of everything he ever valued, can only have been excruciating, his textual double, *The Arcades Project*, emerges into Being and persists solely on the ground of an impossible set of assertions. In their utter impossibility, an intransigence endowing cultural history and criticism and thinking itself with an unprecedented dynamic and flow, resides the only positivity that can be said to have emerged from Benjamin's tortured existential trajectory.

The Arcades Project is a Thing, one of those bizarre and even humorous composites, like the hat that Charles Bovary is fated to wear into his new classroom at the outset of the novel named after his spouse who is so imprudent in her collusion with her drives, or like Franz Kafka's Odradek.² *The Arcades Project* is utterly anomalous. It arises to fill an impossible task, the reconfiguration of nineteenth-century Paris and the experience of living in it under the aura of the epistemological, cultural, and, yes, political formations that arose in its aftermath. It may well be easier for us to acknowledge this dream of imaginative reconstitution when an author of fiction, perhaps of magical realism, assigns it to a character—as when Jorge Luis Borges has his consummate scholar of the peninsular Golden Age, Pierre Menard, compose several strategic passages of *Don Quixote*³ without having read the novel—than it is for us to imagine the act of the textual reconstitution of Paris during the Second Empire that was achieved by an actual scholar, Walter Benjamin. *The Arcades Project* assembles an incompatible array of materials, whose composite effect is to completely disqualify one another. Benjamin, in a strategy reminiscent of Marshall McLuhan's memorable analysis of the first page of the *New York Times*,⁴ not only places historical first-hand accounts of the developments and events from the period of his interest, literary improvisations on the same motifs, popular docu-

2. See Franz Kafka, "The Cares of a Family Man," in *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken, 1976), 427–29.

3. See Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote," in *Ficciones* (New York: Grove, 1962), 45–56.

4. See Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), 2–7.

ments, such as brochures and handbills, and historical, sociological, and critical retrospections of a much later provenance, directly alongside each other. He also makes sure to cite witnesses and analysts whose attitudes toward the unfolding developments could not be more antithetical. As we shall see, one of Benjamin's most cunning strategies in composing *The Arcades* is the subsequent disclosure of the political ramifications of works and assertions initially cited in a milieu of purported neutrality, "repressive tolerance," or "historical objectivity." Charles Fourier and Grandville,⁵ introduced in the early convolutes as endearing, spacey avatars of early nineteenth-century expansionism, eventually emerge, through Alphonse Toussenel, whom they influenced, as early harbingers of the first, fin-de-siècle National Socialism. In keeping with the principle of textual openness, which is an ethical and existential as well as compositional article of faith behind *The Arcades*, Benjamin freely mixes, with the sparest commentary, akin to the minimalist nods and grunts comprising the analyst's primary responses in psychodynamic psychotherapy, the formulations of his beloved radicals, whether Auguste Blanqui, Henri de Saint-Simon, Marx, Engels, or Theodor Adorno with those of the proto-fascists. The textual openness that affords this ongoing, quasi-systematic incompatibility is both a compositional principle and a credo of unabashed belligerence. It is the measure of Benjamin's ethics that he answered systematic social segregation, humiliation, and genocide with what is at most a strategy of generic and compositional belligerence. Benjamin's call for an utterly unbounded text, an array of articulation so open and receptive that it becomes the sky across which the constellation configures its inevitable but belated message, is largely what has made him, for a good thirty years already, so welcome to text-based thinkers, whether deconstructionists or rhetorical critics: "The dialectical image is an image that emerges suddenly, in a flash. What has been is to be held fast—as an image flashing up on the now of its recognizability. The rescue that is carried out by these means—and only by these—can operate solely for the sake of what in the next moment is irretrievably lost."⁶ This performance, as well as assertion, of largely laissez-faire, but strategically interrupted, compositional receptivity, the only milieu receptive to the

5. Given that this important visual artist and cultural figure's proper name was Jean-ignace-isidore Gérard Grandville, it may be well understandable why posterity remembers him simply as Grandville.

6. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), AP, 473, N9,7. Subsequent references to this work are cited parenthetically as AP and by convolute.

literal brilliance of the dialectical flash, cannot, on the other hand, be of enormous consequence to cultural critics for whom intellectual work is a read-out of preconceptions, however complex or subtle they may be. Readers whose results tally with the principles of the disciplines that prompted them to undertake the reading, readers who discover in their research the results already inscribed in their premises, can find in Benjamin only an odd bird, both the inveterate exile who lived such an inconclusive life in several senses of the word and the textual amalgam, *The Arcades*, which functioned as his secret sharer and uncanny double for more than a quarter of his life.

2

It may well beg a number of significant theoretical questions to assert that there is some sort of “space” in *The Arcades Project* that can be discussed independently of its simply Being a text. To what degree is there, as Maurice Blanchot, a text-oriented critic if there ever was one, would have it, a “space of literature”?⁷ If any text solicits us to explore the dimensionality of literary space, it is *The Arcades Project*. One way of appreciating the work is to think of it as the diffuse, panoramic background to two essays that Benjamin composed with an inconceivably greater density, the Exposés of 1935 and 1939, both known as “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century.” These counterventions of the same essay justify Benjamin’s assertion in *Convolute N* that literary montage, that is, the literary equivalent of the technique of violent, expressive, shocking film editing, is the underlying compositional principle of *The Arcades Project*: “Method of this project: literary montage. I needn’t say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them” (*AP*, 460, N1a,8). Even though Benjamin, in keeping with Adorno’s criticisms of the 1935 version of the essay, made significant modifications, both drafts introduce a certain narrative of nineteenth-century Paris by “cutting” between different scenes or loci of sociocultural activity. I would argue that the maintenance of this fiction of separate but parallel spaces of sociopolitical, experiential, aesthetic, and personal or “private” development, the very spaces orchestrated in literary as well as cinematographic montage, is as pivotal to the architecture of *The Arcades Project*

7. See Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 44–48, 51–56, 81, 87, 93, 136–38, 153–57.

as it is to the trajectory of “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century,” no matter which version.

What is crucial about this highly condensed essay is that each of its sections is told from a different perspective, and that the “camera angle” from which each segment is narrated implies a distinct and separate spatial compartment. “Fourier, or the Arcades,” the initial segment of both *Exposés*, takes place precisely in the modern, commercial, inside/outside thoroughfares improvised “through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises” (*AP*, 3). A second section, extruded from the 1939 version, “Daguerre, or the Panoramas,” occupies the photographic frame and the space enclosed by the parabolic panorama; section 3, “Grandville, or the World Exhibitions,” is set in the Champs du Mars and other sites of the spectacular trade shows initiated during the epoch of Benjamin’s concern; section 4, “Louis Philippe, or the Interior,” resides, literally, in the private urban living space that became standardized during this period. Section 5, “Baudelaire, or the Streets of Paris,” takes place less in the streets of Paris than between the margins of the Baudelairean text. This segment opens up a panorama on Paris during the Second Empire from a “text’s-eye view.” The essay’s ultimate section, “Haussmann, or the Barricades,” reverts precisely to the setting abandoned by the bourgeois, the avenues of class conflict and authentic cultural transmission.

The spatial—dare we say architectural?—program of “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century” is rendered even more complex by the division of all sections (except the one on Daguerre, which appeared only in the 1935 version) into dialectically counterweighted movements or subsections. The dialectical image not only captivates while it blinds through its visual explosion; it snares the reader by literally enclosing him or her in the absolutely inevitable and unavoidable space between images related not by logic but by what Freud might call poetic condensation. A capital instance of the Benjaminian dialectical image is the falling star of section 9 in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.”⁸ When we first encounter the falling star, it is a vestige of the naïve wish that can still prevail in communities of tradition and belief, as opposed to ones dominated by industrial mechanization and large-scale capital. When Benjamin transmogrifies this falling star, “trailing clouds of aura,” as it were, into the ivory ball of the roulette wheel, he is not only commenting on the degradation of disarming (and, potentially, reaction-

8. Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 175–79, 184.

ary) belief into the hard-and-fast rules of the modern gaming table. Benjamin also shocks our reading experience by literally capturing us in the between-space between absolutely antithetical, and therefore all the more inevitably intertwined, images.

The poetic condensation of images made intimate to one another precisely through the impossibility of their affinity is what makes the dialectical image tick, or more precisely, what makes it a ticking time bomb waiting to go off. Benjamin engineers this dialectical bombshell, or at least its craters, into each of the spatially discrete sections of "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century."

What the double-Exposé or exposure establishes for *The Arcades Project*, albeit on a miniature scale, is the construction of discrete, though semiporous compartments for different segments of the material. The expansive text of the entire *Arcades* switches off between the compartments demarcated in the Exposé: the frame around the visual image, the public spectacle, the streets, Metro, parks, and even the sewers of Paris, the domestic interior, the typographic innards of the text itself, linking Benjamin in this respect to the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*,⁹ all subsumed under the ur- and ultra-space of Modernity itself, the Paris arcades. These spaces comprise the rooms in the apartment of Benjamin's massive array and collation. The implied handheld camera in the text switches abruptly and seemingly at random from one of these rooms to the next.

If we grant that a notion, or at least a metaphor, of space holds true for *The Arcades Project*, the Exposé grounds that space in complexity from the outset. Even while the loci of textual action shift back and forth as described above, *The Arcades* transpires in a hyperdetermined metaspace in which the spaces of Paris as a textual construct, the archive, and the medium of the book, with its typographic architecture, are seamlessly superimposed upon each other.

3

A register is distinct from a space. Legally, a register is a census or other listing made in the service of the king. The royal gaze thus has the aspect about it of a textual scanner. To register is to stray within the purview of the collective public gaze and be marked by it. Registration is being

9. See, among many possible passages, James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking, 1986), 107–24, 182–83.

inscribed within the collation or list that is scanned by the optical organ or instrument of public scrutiny.

To the degree that a register comprises a spatialized text, an inscription situated in a particular document or public zone, a register is inherently spatial in nature. But as a text in its own right, a register is distinct from a discrete spatial compartment. The history of the book is deeply intertwined with the practice of its fragmentation into multiple registers, as if the repression instrumented by typographical codification produces resistance in the form of a proliferation of consecutive subtexts. The architecture of the book is made possible, in English, by a binding, the same term by which, in the biblical catachresis, in an episode from Genesis important to Kierkegaard and Benjamin, the restraint of Isaac is equated with Abraham's submission to God's sublime arbitrariness.¹⁰ The codification of the Judaic law in the Talmud between the first and fourth centuries A.D. produces a reference work fragmented into a bewildering array of simultaneous, mutually supplemental, and mutually undermining registers.

This type of text could only have fascinated Benjamin, who as we know was captivated by interlinear translation, libraries, and the superimposed strata underlying the modern city. There is a degree to which the Paris of *The Arcades Project* is subdivided not only into discrete spaces but into registers. There is a correspondence, in the sense of a beloved term that Benjamin appropriates from the poetics of Baudelaire,¹¹ a term incorporating gaping distances and differences as well as affinities, between the floors and levels of Parisian space and architecture and the registers of text design in *The Arcades*. Paris was increasingly the utopian, alternate world to which Benjamin relocated as the material and ideological struts were pulled out from under everything he held dear, but the textual architecture that Benjamin crystallizes in his imaginary reconstitution of the Second Empire is Talmudic in nature, belongs to the literature of multiregister texts, including, as well, illuminated manuscripts and illustrated canons. Benjamin's engagement with Judaism, like his rapport with women, was lifelong and painful. It underwent many ambivalences, rapprochements, diversions underground, and triumphant reemergences. To my mind, *The Arcades Project* is situated at the poignant interstice between Paris, *Hauptstadt* of every-

10. Genesis 22:1–19. Also see Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, vol. 6, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), 15–38, 48–53, 59–63.

11. Walter Benjamin, *AP*, 248, 250, 272, 461, 558.

thing meaningful and still viable to Benjamin, and a registered oversight and composition that may well constitute the highest typographical expression of Benjamin's lifelong *Auseinandersetzung* with the Judaic sensibility. *The Arcades Project*, in other words, is Benjamin's Talmud, disguised as a text-medium Web site of nineteenth-century Paris. *The Arcades* offers insight not only into the diverse strands of reactionary and liberatory ideology and event that emerged from nineteenth-century Parisian commerce, art, politics, entertainment, architecture, and so on; it also illuminates the tectonic forces by which texts in general, exemplified by the Talmud and its typographical counterparts, organize themselves into registers of composition, reference, meaning, and misunderstanding.

Benjamin plumbs the geological and architectural depths of Paris, then, not only in his hymn to the city, his will, embedded in his nostalgist-modernist pose, to resurrect the *experience* of the Second Empire. He is interested in the horizontal *zones* of the city as spatial markers of or preambles to textual registers, that is, spatialized texts resounding, concatenating with others. It is in this context that we can appreciate that Benjamin incorporates into several convolutes material on such topics as Paris's ancient foundations and sewers, the basement of the Châtelet de Paris, where, in a passage by Victor Hugo, "men condemned to the galleys were put . . . until the day of their departure for Toulon"; also where "almost all the argot songs were born" (*AP*, 93, C5a,1), and the horizontal bands that ironwork, in the form of balconies and balustrades, added to the facades of Hausmannian buildings on the *grands boulevards*.

It is an uncited passage from Louis Aragon's *Paysan de Paris*,¹² a work realizing the aesthetic potential of the arcades in the manifestation of surreal juxtapositions, that discloses most powerfully the combined parallelism and disjunction characterizing the zones, scriptural as well as architectural, according to which *The Arcades* is articulate. The strategy of *The Arcades Project* in no way preempts the possibility that the most telling passages of the works to which Benjamin, Paris, history, chance, and textuality itself lead us are *elsewhere*.

Future mysteries will rise from the ruins of today's. Let us take a stroll along the Passage de l'Opéra, and have a closer look at it. It is a double tunnel, with a single gateway opening to the north on to the Rue Chauchat, and two gateways opening to the south on

12. Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, intro. and trans. Simon Watson Taylor (Boston: Exact Change, 1994).

to the boulevard. Its two arcades, the western one, called Galerie du Thermomètre, are joined by two short cuts. . . . If we enter the Galerie du Thermomètre through its opening between the café I have just mentioned and a bookshop, the Librairie Eugène Rey, having passed through the iron gates which at night-time bar the passage to all yearnings deemed contrary to public morals, we can see that whereas practically the whole length of the right-hand façade is taken up, at ground-floor level, by window displays of all kinds, a café, and so on, the upper storeys seem to be occupied by one single building. It is indeed a single edifice, stretching the entire frontage: a hotel whose rooms possess precisely the atmosphere and lighting appropriate to the laboratory of pleasures which the hotel offers as its sole justification for its existence.¹³

Only from a single vantage point, according to only one line of sight (or flight), made possible by the architectural sleight-of-hand of an obscure shortcut, does a hidden coherence of the second story of activity become evident or explicit. The architecture of the arcades encompasses as much that is indirect and misleading as that which is linear, in the service of unobstructed flow. It is an architecture of feints and false leads as much as it is one of easy traffic and free trade. Its vertical structure is familiar to any reader of Western metaphysical systems: At street level reigns particularity, the succession of discrete wares and enterprises, the cornucopia of goods and flavors, exacerbated by European Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment expansionism. In a most powerful sense, the linearity and double-sided structure endemic to all streets, ways, paths, and passages, comprise an almost universal nexus to the experience of particularity. Directly above street level, in Aragon's vignette of Paris as an arcade, prevails an encompassing unity of purpose, as well as of architecture and visual display. In a Kantian universe, this superior purview and coordination would be ascribed to the Transcendental; in the surreal Paris reconfigured by Aragon, and of such centrality to the imaginary of the *Passagen-Werk*, it belongs to sex-by-the-hour, for the second story of the Galerie du Thermomètre is an hourly sex hotel, such as now abound in our livelier cosmopolitan centers. Aragon substitutes the universality of the drive for that of the Transcendental. He establishes as well an architectural program in which the Paris of the Second Empire is configured by radically differing, even contradictory registers of activity, which are nonetheless complementary.

13. Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 15.

The serious atmosphere of business on the ground floor (for in the money-economy initiated during the period of Benjamin's purview, *fric* is everything, and transactions are a serious matter) gives way on the second to the accumulation of pleasure, and the frivolous expenditure of the pocket change held over from the more fundamental profit motive. The radically divergent countereconomies of the Galerie du Thermomètre coexist side by side, vertically, that is. The sex industry and the world of legitimate business live off the same economy, yet they deploy energy and goods and invoke ideology in radically different fashions. The concurrent registers of the *Galerie* live off each other and illuminate one another, contradict each other, and, in a vital sense, consummate one another. This is not only a socioeconomic and architectural configuration pivotal to *The Arcades Project* as well as to the Paris of its epoch; it is a program decisive to the architecture of books, and their internal media of illumination, for their own major thrusts and assertions. Such works, whether the Talmud, *The Arcades Project*, or Persian and medieval European illuminated manuscripts, ornament a vast expenditure of the drive, sexual as well as writerly, for they both establish certain broad understandings and bind culture to them, and witness and even orchestrate their unbinding and fragmentation.

4

The architecture of reading compels us toward the unavoidable, far-more-than-schematic analogy between the architecture of the Talmudic page, the literary montage characterizing the Exposés of 1935 and 1939, and the parallel horizontal zones demarcated by *The Arcades Project*. The complexity of this analogy is only compounded by the fact that it spans visual and writerly levels. We cannot even know for sure whether Benjamin's fascination with and play at parallel registers of signification are motivated primarily by his exegetical, architectural, or historiographic interests or whether all these motifs conspire in the design and construction of Benjamin's most Talmudic work. Yet a Talmudic substratum to *The Arcades Project*, analogous to the caverns, grottoes, and limestone quarries to which Benjamin's sources (if not he himself) plumb, may well teach us something of its architecture and illuminate an obscure facet to the translation process that *The Arcades* involved. *The Arcades Project*, in a particular sense, is a *translation* of the Talmud, in a distinctly Benjaminian modality, into a contemporary parlance. In general, it is a rendition of and rationale for all memorable projects of multiregister inscription.

The Talmudic story I want to discuss concerns the compression, fractal repetition and expansion, and thematic cascading and fragmentation characterizing a single Mishnaic proposition and its Gemaric elucidation and elaboration in an exemplary passage, taught early in any Talmudic education, and surely known to Gershom Scholem, Martin Buber, and other of Benjamin's compatriots and sources in Judaic studies. The passage in question heads the third chapter of tractate Bava Metzia, literally, the "Middle Gate," and concerns the adjudication of disputes occasioned by failures or misunderstandings of delegated responsibility. The central column of the Talmudic page, the basis for all appended commentaries and glossaries, stages the alternation between the formulations of the Mishna, codified during the first generation of biblical exegesis by Talmudists, dated by Adin Steinsaltz between A.D. 30 and 200,¹⁴ and the expansive elaboration offered by the Gemara, assembled by rabbis over the next three centuries, extending to a vast range of subjects including ritual practices, legal determinations, and norms of propinquity. We can say of the Talmud that, like other fractally organized works (and here I am guided by J. Hillis Miller's move toward a fractal reading of Proust in *Black Holes*¹⁵), a single structure and operating system of argumentative and rhetorical features suffices for the work as a whole, with all the expansiveness of its subject matter and the intricacy of the cross-referencing and cross-checking that it encompasses. In this sense, any section of the Mishna and its Gemaric recapitulation harbors the seed structure characterizing the work as a whole. This is, for Miller, at the heart of fractality, as is the "self-dissimilarity"¹⁶ established in each section of Talmudic argumentation and the question that occasions it, as a highly distinctive local environment, irreducibly different from all others, even when, by process of cross-referencing, it is grafted onto thematically related segments.

The ongoing alternation between Mishnaic compression and Gemaric expansion, prolixity, cross-reference, and grafting, a fractal infrastructure, accounts only for the central column of the pointed Talmudic text, which achieved its enduring form in the decades following the Gutenberg Bible. Around this continuous central column are gathered the marginalia, indices, and canonical commentaries, making each page of the Talmud a unique

14. Adin Steinsaltz, *A Reference Guide to the Talmud: The Steinsaltz Edition* (New York: Random House, 1989), 11–36, provides a comprehensive overview to this history.

15. J. Hillis Miller and Manuel Asensi, *Black Holes; Or, Boustrophedonic Reading* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999), 333–35, 349–55, 359–61.

16. Miller and Asensi, *Black Holes*, 359.

graphic composition and prayer to the abundance of typographical registers.¹⁷ The structure of the Talmudic page itself is thus another instance of a fractality enabling a canon that presumed vast authority in regulating communal and private behavior, even down to the level of personal habits and feminine hygiene, to fragment systematically in the face of being bound into a conceptual as well as physical compendium. Like the contract of marriage and the episode of Genesis regarding Abraham's travail in sacrificing Isaac to YHWH, known as the *binding (Akedah)* of Isaac, it is the unique feature of the compendium, especially the multiregister work, to mark the explosion and fragmentation of the state of affairs that it presumably binds. The codification of the law amid the comprehensive record of rabbinic debate encompassed by the Talmud and the intricate typography of the Talmudic page signals, as well, a fragmentation of narrative and a cascading of response in irregular and skewed directions. By the same token, the convolutes of *The Arcades Project* both encompass and codify a certain history, and perform the demolition, in the progression toward fascism and anomie, of the utopianism that that history promised. Fourierism reaches a crossroads with Toussenel, at which point it takes a sharp right. Little comes of Saint-Simon. The barricades-fighter Blanqui can only attest to the boredom and blankness of petrified experience, repetition actualized. There is no better theater for the nullification of liberations dreamed in the Second Empire than the most comprehensive compendium of its textual remains. To the degree that the individual convolutes constitute library stacks devoted to the themes that preoccupy them, Benjamin experienced the storage difficulties endemic to all libraries.

The counterregisters that both ornament and supplement the central column on the Talmudic page include the running commentary of that French intellectual among the rabbis, Schlomo ben Yitzhak (1040–1105), otherwise known as Rashi, and a compendium of his followers' readings known as the *Tosafot*, literally "the supplements," set as a distinct typographical register. Editions of the Talmud published in Vilna added another ongoing gloss, an early one contributed by Rabbi Hananel ben Hushiel, who lived in North Africa between A.D. 990 and 1055. Other "windows" on the Talmudic page identified by Steinsaltz in his *Reference Guide to the Tal-*

17. Steinsaltz, in *A Reference Guide*, 48–59, identifies the multiple registers and units of the Talmudic page. A similar schematic is provided by Robert Goldenberg in his fine overview, "Talmud," in *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, ed. Barry Holtz (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 140–43.

mud include *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah*, a cross-reference to other legal works treating the issues raised by the Mishna and Gemara and *Torah Or*.¹⁸

Each of these registers of elucidation might hope or presume to stabilize an intent or meaning otherwise unclear, ephemeral, or self-undermining. Each register ultimately bears witness to the intransigence of the legal/moral picture that the law of the Mishna/Gemara would represent. The exact meaning takes flight the closer that each commentator comes to capturing it, a predicament shared by Humbert Humbert the lover and Vladimir Nabokov the lepidopterist. When we observe and contemplate the cumulative effect on precise signification and adjudication registered by the assemblage or aggregate of commentaries inscribed on each Talmudic page, the contrast between the contraction of significance, the precision of concurrent exegetical and social contracts, and the explosion of textual possibility becomes staggering, overwhelming. The Talmudic exegete worships the deity in the explosion of textual possibilities resulting from the perfectly understandable human impulse to pin down, to pin down a nuance as well as a butterfly. God is the very explosion of possibility, at once expansive and precise, celebrated as well in the intricacy and stylistic variation of illuminated Arabic script, the geometry of Islamic visual decoration, and in the algebraic figural multiplication adorning the major Buddhist stupas, whether at Borabadur (Java), Angkor Wat (Cambodia), or Kajaharo (India).¹⁹ The bicolumnar architecture that Jacques Derrida devises for the typography of *Glas* is at once a simulacrum and commentary on the precision and openness of the Talmudic play of exegetical registers.²⁰ By the same token, there is a residue of the Talmudic in the engagement with the book medium and the intricate lines of communication that it sets up in Avital Ronell's *The Telephone Book*.²¹

18. See Steinsaltz, *A Reference Guide*, 53.

19. The geometric thrust and bearing of Islamic visual decoration over and against a Buddhist and Hindu reach toward sublimity through algebraic multiplication was one of the many treasures revealed to me and my fellow students at Brandeis University during the 1960s in the art history courses offered by Leo Bronstein.

20. As Derrida specified at a conference in Kolding, Denmark, held 25–26 May 2001, devoted to a collective reprise of *Glas*, one can quickly go astray in linking his 1974 work, pivoting as it does on the very hinge between socio-ideological conventionality and its not totally inverse Other, to a religious canon that, albeit typographically radical, does not shy at predicating behavior and the terms of social tolerance and exclusion. The rapport between deconstruction and theology will never be an easy one, to whatever extent both discourses verge toward the limits of metaphysical and ideological systematization.

21. Avital Ronell's *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech* (Lin-

The Talmudic passage evoking my interest here concerns the burdens of delegated responsibility as it is adjudicated by artificial language in a rabbinic court. The passage constituted by a single Mishna and the Gemara arising to embroider on it deliberates on ownership and the liability that accrues when property is left in the hands of a figure that Steinsaltz translates as the “bailee,” but whose term derives from the Hebrew verbal root for watching or guarding, the *shomair*. A watchperson may be paid or unpaid. Obviously, a paying arrangement betokens both greater responsibility and legal liability. The Mishna, with astonishing compression, recapitulates the prevailing rule during the Amoritic period (30 B.C. to A.D. 200). As the Gemara embroiders on a range of possible situations emerging from the Mishnaic strictures, states of affairs with varying degrees of logical complexity, likelihood, predictability, and premeditation, what emerges through the variants of which property was left with whom and of which circumstances conspired to produce the damages is the wider issue of delegation. In its breathtaking swings between Mishnaic condensation and Gemaric prolixity, the Talmud would presume to bring peace, in the form of broad articulate sensibility (what contemporary Buddhism might call mindfulness), to the very human torment often instigated by conflicts over property and the issues of responsibility and the degrees of its assignment and assessment. At moments, in a process whose name I will hazard as textual cascading, common to works such as the Talmud, *The Arcades Project*, and *Glas*, we cannot but smile as the Talmudic text conjures situations of escalating contingency and tenuousness before us, sometimes eventuating literally in what contemporary insurance companies would call “acts of God.” The case before us involves responsibilities of delegation.

In their deliberately artificial condensation and closure, the Mishnaic propositions verge on a legalistic speech act, a vow that will serve as a concrete basis for the rendition of justice, plain and simple. The first Mishna in the third chapter of Bava Metzia, which establishes a discursive and tonal landscape at the same time that it initiates a substantial strand of argumentation, runs as follows:

Someone who deposits an animal or utensils with his fellow, and they were stolen or they were lost; [if the bailee] paid and did not want to

coln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989) not only engages in a profound and original meditation on the philosophical operating system underlying her chosen phenomena; it brings the book medium to some of its foregone conclusions. This work “dissolves” the genre of the academic treatise while preparing the way for something else, emerging on the horizon but not yet fully realized.

take an oath . . . and be exempt . . . [if] the thief is found, he pays double payment. [If] he slaughtered or sold [it], he pays fourfold or fivefold payment. To whom does he pay? To the one with whom the deposit [was left]. [If the bailee] took an oath and did not want to pay, [and] the thief was found, he pays double payment. [If] he slaughtered or sold [it], he pays fourfold or fivefold payment. To whom does he pay? To the owner of the deposit.²²

I cannot overstate how clipped and minimalist the language of this formulation is, regularly eschewing basic pronouns and prepositions. The spareness of the formulation performs the clarity to which legalistic determination would purport. The explicit determination to which the formula reaches is of liability in cases where damage occurs to deposited goods. Liability may accrue to either the negligent *shomair*, or watchperson, who is possibly a thief, or to the owner who has instigated the legal controversy. It could emerge, on malicious grounds, that the owner is the thief or adulterer of the goods, which can, of course, also be damaged or stolen by a third party, but this is to be determined by the court. The formulaic text would thus presume to execute two forms of preexistent punishment: double payment, or its more onerous alternative, literally “fourfold or fivefold” payment, liable to two potential agents, the negligent watchperson or thief, who are thus linked in reciprocal symmetry. The formula, by the same token, allocates the damages to two potential recipients, the watchperson or the owner.

Assessment of damages in this situation is, to a considerable degree, inflected by the watchperson’s, and, implicitly, by the thief’s, right to take an oath regarding innocence and degree of responsibility in a rabbinic court of law. In the case of the performance of this speech-act, the court is predisposed to grant credence to the party making it, but where, in the course of deliberation the oath proves false, the presumption of the speaker’s guilt emerges, and higher penalties are assessed. Within the framework of the Talmud, the oath situation is a secondary language game grafted or templated on the “primary” or empirical situation of damaged or stolen goods and the controversy they initiate. In keeping with a Judaic ideology of the sanctity of explicitness and self-regulated responsibility in human interactions, the court is predisposed to grant credulity to a formally correct oath, but the willful adulteration of this scrip or currency betokens malicious intent toward the community.

22. Citations of the Talmudic passage at hand derive from Adin Steinsaltz, ed., *The Talmud: The Steinsaltz Edition*, vol. 2, tractate Bava Metzia, part 2 (New York: Random House, 1990), 207–67. Subsequent references are cited parenthetically as *T*.

Yet taking an oath is a sociological as well as a rhetorical and formal act. There may be strategic, that is, interpersonal, reasons for avoiding the oath independent of its role in establishing the facts of the case. For example, my taking the oath may unfairly implicate a potential suspect near and dear to me, or someone in relation to whom I have a vested interest in the avoidance of public conflict. The Gemara in this chapter of Bava Metzia displays considerable sensibility to the ambiguity between the oath's role as a secondary truth-value and its status in the sociological struggle for the moral, that is, communal, high ground. This is of considerable interest to all of us who, having enjoyed and benefited from the revolution in criticism and scholarship toward linguistically programmed models, wish to trace the intricate intertwining between textual dynamics and the laws—and I deploy this term with trepidation—of social life.

The first Mishna of the chapter, set in a scenario of damaged goods, thus leaves us with an aggrieved owner and a paid or unpaid watchperson, who either has or has not exempted him- or herself from legal damages with an oath. The intrusion of a third party, the thief, aggravates the always already tenuous situation of trust. The Mishnaic text establishes different levels of punishment to the negligent watchperson, and it opens the question as to whether the thief's punishment, in the form of legal damages, accrues to the owner, that is, the depositor, or to the watchperson from whom the property was diverted. It serves as a template on which subsequent Mishnas, and their Gemaric embroideries, will play variations, for the Talmud, like *The Arcades Project* and other multiregister works, is a matrix of permutational play and elaboration. It establishes a context in which the willful public misrepresentation of the facts, which are not necessarily the same as some abstract or transcendental truth, is as egregious a misdeed as the empirical act of theft or fraud. The strategic importance of this Mishna is magnified by the fact that it establishes an entire culture of delegation at the same time that it establishes a framework and mechanisms for the determination of certain forms of property liability.

The body of Gemaric elaborations on this stripped-down mini legal code understandably gravitates from the most tangible to the most unlikely hypothetical instances. The specifications of the Gemara belong not to case law but rather to speculative law. The instances that the Gemara belabors are speculations, and their progression is from rootedness in material probability to "acts of God," the most tenuous of outcomes.

The Gemaric elaboration of the first Mishna in the chapter runs a full gamut from logical and sociological analysis to figural, at times flamboyant,

performance. Its first questions are the predictable ones, easily addressed on a substantive level: Why, for one, does the Mishna specify a deposit of either animals or utensils, thus encompassing organic and inorganic categories of property? In the case of a lost animal, should penalties take into account potential accretions of value, including shearings and offspring? On this point, Rabbis Rami bar Ḥama and Meir part ways, the latter contesting the former's assertion: "Surely a person cannot transfer ownership of something that has not yet come into the world" (*T*, II, 2, 33B, 209). The inquiry into the futurity of ownership segues quite well into an analysis of the oath-situation proper, in which a commitment regarding the future as well as the past is made. What are the sociological and ethical implications of paying damages without taking an oath, as opposed to taking the oath without wanting to pay? The distinction between a compensated watchperson (*shomair saḥar*) and a gratis watchperson (*shomair ḥinam*) is factored into the possibilities engendered by the oath. Compensation for losses, according to the Gemara, is indeed eventually accorded to watchpeople who could have exempted themselves from damages by means of the oath, but who allowed the facts of the situation, including their innocence, to emerge through the proceedings. This analysis establishes at least two motives for a party's taking the oath in a dispute: not wanting to pay, and preempting the appearance of guilt. Paying damages without swearing, on the other hand, suggests hesitation regarding the truth-value embodied in the oath, or future legal amplifications or charges yet to emerge.

A distinctive Talmudic feature evident in this passage is that the level of performativity, itself constituting the interruption of conceptual elaboration by means of assonance, refrain, and incantation, and other material features of language, augments as the argumentation reaches toward finer, sometimes even tenuous distinctions. The Gemaric text is at times constrained to perform the proliferation of semiological and sociological complexity that the situation of loss and speech-action occasions. In this context, Kafka's "Parable of the Doorkeeper," consummating a legalistic novel in which a preliminary interrogation has already transpired in an audience that can only be a Talmudic academy, opens up a scene of exegesis whose scope of proliferation can only be Talmudic.

The debate as to whether our Mishna stresses the anticipatory or the assertive function of the oath of nonliability, whether the oath is primarily a strategic (performative) or assertive (constative) speech-act, rises into a concatenation of commitments to pay. "The Tannaim of the School of Rabbi Ḥiyya and the School of Rabbi Oshaya" conclude that the constative and

performative thrusts of the oath “were taught next to each other” (*T*, II, 2, 34A, 217). “It is obvious [that if] he said: ‘I will not pay,’ and then he said: ‘I will pay,’ surely he said ‘I will pay.’ But [if] he said ‘I will pay’ [34B] and then he said ‘I will not pay,’ what [is the law]? Do we say he has retracted, or perhaps he stands by his word, and he is putting him off?” (*T*, II, 2, 34A–34B, 217–18). The litany of “I will pay” and “I will not pay” here stages the concrete performance of the oath at the same time that it inquires into the logical indeterminacies that the oath occasions. The oath itself arises in a concatenating refrain, the reverberation of a knell, or *glas*.²³ In the bicolumnar typography of his work *Glas*, Derrida stretches beyond recognition the mutually reinforcing thrust of the ongoing registers encompassed by the Talmudic page. Derrida glosses the problematic, and even hypocritical, Hegelian pronouncements of family ethics and law with an opposed column of text devoted to the scandalous Rabbi Genet. Yet the sustained dissonance and supplementarity of discourses wreathing themselves around the problematic of idealization itself surely extends the Talmudic play of registers.

The outbreak of music and lyrical poetry within the staid deliberations on the law signals, metaphysically and ideologically, that there is something higher than the resolution of the case at hand, and even higher than the opinions of those fellow academics, the rabbis. This something can be named only in two ways: whether it is YHWH himself or the mechanism of the language that can associate such assonance and rhythm.

The Gemara, proceeding to the liability of the *shomair*'s sons in the event that he dies while in possession of the deposit—alas, in my own citations, I can no longer evade the gender-specificity of the Judaic law—rises to an even more impressive concatenation of “ifs” than in our preceding example:

Do we say he has retracted? . . . [If] he said “I will pay,” and he died, and his sons said “We will not pay,” what [is the law]? Do we say they have retracted, or perhaps they stand by their father’s word? . . . [If] the sons paid, what [is the law]? . . . [If] he paid the sons, what [is the law]? . . . [If] the sons paid the sons, what [is the law]? [If] he paid half, what [is the law]? [If] he borrowed two cows and paid [for] one of

23. For Derrida’s virtuoso performance of *glas* as concatenation, of the repetition and cascading of subrational elements (e.g. *gl*) speaking more to the composition of language than more definitive components, see his *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 47–53, 119–21, 139–42, 144–45, 147, 149–62, 210, 212, 222, 235–36, 253.

them, what [is the law]? [If] he borrowed from partners and paid one of them, what [is the law]? (*T*, II, 2, 34B, 219)

In a very concrete manner, as tangible as the interpersonal relations that the Talmud aspires to orchestrate, the text performs the lacunae and stutters that enter the case upon the *shomair's* death.

In a subsequent passage, the Gemara deliberates on property appraised to pay the claims of a creditor. What would happen, for instance, if the owner of such property were a woman? And if the woman died? And if the property in question were her usufruct property, possessions not specified in the *ketubah* or wedding contract (*T*, II, 2, 35A, 232)? Established conventions of claims, oaths, and resolution apply. The appearance of a woman here, and of the Angel of Death in the disputations arising from the very next Mishna, signals that prior Talmudic order and decorum are going to pot. It is symptomatic of the stress that the feminine places on this system that property is gendered at all. From this debate, however, we ascertain that it certainly is. The emergence of female issues in the deliberation coincides with the expression of a certain violence. Legalistic restraint is perhaps beginning to wear thin. The law formulates the terms of property seizures (*T*, II, 2, 35A, 228, 230, 232). The Angel of Death cannot stem the possibilities emerging from the case, in the subsequent Mishna, of a stolen cow that perishes in the course of its hire. In an instance where the cow dies, as we would say, of natural causes ("The air of the meadow killed it," specifies the Gemara [*T*, II, 2, 36B, 248]), the deliberation exercises recourse to the Angel of Death:

What is the reason? For we say: [To] the Angel of Death what difference is there. . . . And Rava admits [that] in any [case] where a thief stole it in the meadow and it died naturally in the thief's house, he [the bailee] is liable. What is the reason? For if the Angel of Death had left it alone, it would have been [left] standing in the thief's house. Abaye said to Rava: According to you, who say: [To] the Angel of Death what difference is there [if the animal is] here or there. . . . But let him say to him: [To] the Angel of Death what difference is there [if the animal is] here or there? (*T*, II, 2, 36B 249–50)

Such finitude toward the issues of property, ownership, appropriation, misappropriation, evidence, and the attestation of the state of affairs at hand does the Talmud reach that even the Angel of Death throws up her hands at the significance of whether the closely watched cow dies in the meadow or

in the thief's house. The tradition that worships YHWH in part by spinning out possibility from the divine text also issues forth in a Nietzschean laughter at the wider absurdity of the proliferation. Out of the intense concern (*Sorge*) for difference issues a sublime in-difference, the ultimate wellspring of Jewish humor and Judaic ethics alike.

Throughout the disputation, the registers of Rashi, the *Tosafot* (or supplements), the *Torah Or*, and *Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah* monitor the action taking place in the central column, in the main frame, as it were. Impartial observers to a contention that may well go awry, the alternate registers constitute the symptom of a crisis of textual and moral codification at the same time that they would supply a guardrail, a restraining order. On the very first point of our Mishna, for example, *Tosafot* asserts that the case is limited to the theft of the deposited property; the penalties that the Talmud takes under consideration do not really pertain to the situation of loss (*T*, II, 2, 33B, 207). This is a pivotal specification, and subsequent argumentation is indeed slanted toward a theft situation and the malicious intent that it implies. Rashi and Ra'avad enter a particularly pointed dispute as to the accrual of liabilities to the watchperson's sons. "*Ra'avad* argues," according to Steinsaltz, "that the Gemara must be referring to a case where the depositor dies after the animal was stolen" (*T*, II, 2, 4B, 218–19), whereas Rashi insists that the theft predated the death. The architecture of the Talmudic page places the additional registers of traditions, commentary, and cross-references *around* the central column of Mishnaic/Gemaraic elaboration and give-and-take. The secondary registers are as close to a physical scaffolding as text allows. Yet it is precisely the explosion of potential formulation and meaning that the support apparatus documents and ornaments. The Talmud, and its *semblables* in the universe of multiregister works, both registers and celebrates the unlimited self-engendering of script.

5

In all likelihood, I am culpable, perhaps to the "extreme decree," of straying far from Benjamin's home, his final one, an imaginary home, situated somewhere in the Paris of the Second Empire. What could, after all, the obsessive disputations of the Amoritic and Tannaitic periods have in any significant way to do with such phenomena as the development of the arcades, the initiation of international trade expositions, the massive deployment of cast iron and plate glass in construction and design, the spread of prostitution and gambling as marginal economies to a voracious, fast-paced

brand of capitalism, the invention of photography and industrial techniques of mass production, the emergence of the modern mass media, and the disturbances of 1848 and the Paris Commune? No two phenomena could be more distant than the Talmudic academies of Palestine and Babylonia—in places such as Sura and Pumpedita—and Paris during the nineteenth century. The later convolutes of *The Arcades Project* register a blurring of the distinct camera angles organizing the Exposéés of 1935 and 1939. They witness the cascading of excessive historical and documentary material to venues where they no longer pack a concentrated punch.

Yet if it be granted that Benjamin immersed himself as few others of his era in the Being, design, and vicissitudes of books, his peers in this regard being the likes of Kafka, Proust, and Joyce, the considerable affinities between the Talmud and *The Arcades Project*, the massive, final, and unfinished preoccupation of his life, are in no way far fetched. Indeed, during the last days of his residence in Paris, Benjamin confided the manuscript of his yet and constitutionally unfinished treatise to Georges Bataille. Had Bataille not successfully fulfilled the responsibilities of the *shomair hinam*, the unpaid watchperson, we would not have the pleasure of puzzling over *The Arcades Project* today. Both works, the Talmud and *The Arcades Project*, configure themselves in multiple, simultaneous, ongoing registers of elucidation and activity. Both works arise out of and perform the cultural material that makes them possible. Both works prefigure contemporary cybernetics by configuring their various topics into print-medium Web sites and by developing a typography of windows. Both works set into play an open-ended textual cascading over the categories and boundaries that they themselves establish.

Through Scholem, Buber, and others, the Talmud indeed comprised part of the cultural landscape to which Benjamin belonged from early on in his formation. The Talmud resided in Benjamin's close vicinity in the same way that political formations, some of a venerable and outmoded pedigree, including "nomadic despotism" and feudalism, lurk, according to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*,²⁴ just beneath the surface of modern, constitutional, presumably "safe" and liberal societies.

24. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 139–42, 148; also *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 140–42. I have attempted to formulate the status of these outmoded political formations that nonetheless somehow always lurk beneath the surface of social space in "Deterritorializing the Text: Flow-Theory and Deconstruction," *MLN* 115 (2000): 986–91.

Multiregister works, whether the Talmud, *The Arcades Project*, or *Glas*, clearly capitalize on certain spatial and typographical features of texts in order to highlight the dialogic, polysemic, exegetical, and glossematic features of writing. The spatial experimentation of the Talmud, *The Arcades Project*, *Glas*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Finnegans Wake*, and related works belongs, in this respect, to what Maurice Blanchot has termed “the space of literature.” It is in this space, hopefully with a slightly aggravated sensibility to its intricacies, that the present essay closes.

Benjamin Now: Afterthoughts on *The Arcades Project*

Kevin McLaughlin

Now might be an opportune moment for a reconsideration of the critical work of Walter Benjamin—an opportune moment now that a first generation of translations is giving way to the new and much more extensive English Benjamin of Harvard University Press’s *Selected Writings*, an opportune moment above all, however, now that Benjamin’s *Passagen-Werk* has appeared in English as *The Arcades Project*. Though they are by now familiar, let me quote Rolf Tiedemann’s remarks on his original two-volume 1982 edition:

There are some books whose fate has been settled long before they even exist as books. Benjamin’s unfinished *Passagen-Werk* is just such a case. Many legends have been woven around it since Adorno first mentioned it in an essay published in 1950. Those legends became even more complexly embroidered after a two-volume selection of Benjamin’s letters appeared, which abounded in state-

These afterthoughts are based on opening remarks for the conference “Benjamin Now: Critical Encounters with *The Arcades Project*,” held on 6–7 April 2001 at Brown University.

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ments about his intentions for the project. But these statements were neither complete nor coherent. As a result, the most contradictory rumors spread about a book that competing Benjamin interpreters persistently referred to in the hope that it would solve the puzzle raised by his intellectual physiognomy. That hope has remained unrealized.¹

As might have been anticipated from Tiedemann's comments, among the many critical reactions that have greeted the publication of the *Passagen-Werk* in German in 1982 and then the English *Arcades Project* in 1999, none has been more prominent than a questioning of what exactly the *Passagen-Werk* or *Arcades Project* is: Does Benjamin's text appear to us as a collection of research notes for what was in fact to have been one or a number of "unrealized" projects, or as, say, a great modernist work in its own right?

What has not been sufficiently appreciated is that such reactions point to a philosophical question that is fundamental to *The Arcades Project* and to Benjamin's work as a whole. For Benjamin's far-flung Paris project raises what is, in Aristotelian terms, the philosophical and yet uncategorizable question of potentiality and actuality. Reflecting on this matter in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, Martin Heidegger has noted that "to ask about potentiality and actuality is essential philosophizing" [*nach Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit fragen . . . ist eigentliches Philosophieren*].² In other words, philosophy is a matter of looking into, and looking after, potentiality and actuality. If looking into and looking after *The Arcades Project* involve a question, and a questioning, of potentiality and actuality, then Benjamin's work may be said to incite philosophical reflection on an issue that was, as Heidegger suggests, incompletely explored in ancient metaphysics. Benjamin took up the issue of potentiality and actuality in a number of contexts—contexts indicated by the array of key terms inflected by *potentiality* that make up Benjamin's critical vocabulary—*translatability*, *legibility*, *reproducibility*, *cognizability*, and so on.³ These terms are part of a discourse of potentiality, or, as Benjamin called it, virtuality, that can be traced from the early writings on language to the literary critical essays on Goethe and the baroque

1. Rolf Tiedemann, "Dialectics at a Standstill: Approaches to the *Passagen-Werk*," trans. Gary Smith and André Lefevere, in *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 929.

2. Martin Heidegger, *Aristoteles, Metaphysik, Theta. 1–3: Von Wesen und Wirklichkeit der Kraft* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1981), 9–11.

3. On this point, see Samuel Weber, "Benjamin's Writing Style," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly, 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1:261–64.

Trauerspiel, to the later cultural criticism and *The Arcades Project*. Virtuality is also the subject of critical reflections on the aesthetic concept of “the work.” These surface in Benjamin’s study of German Romanticism and, in particular, of the Romantics’ understanding of the work as a medium of potentiality. Benjamin’s rethinking, with the Romantics, of the category of the work as medium and his questioning of traditional views of this concept might be relevant to what confronts us now as his *Arcades Project*. As a way of reflecting back on the essays presented here, let me try to indicate briefly how the handling of the concept of work (*Werk*) in Benjamin’s early study of the Romantics might be applicable to the judgments of his last work, *Das Passagen-Werk*, offered by the contributions to this symposium and by all future commentaries on this work.

Benjamin addresses the question of the work most directly in his early doctoral dissertation on German Romanticism, *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*. According to Benjamin, the decisive philosophical contribution of the Romantics starts with the attempt to think through Kantian reflection in relation not to the Cartesian ego but to the work of art—and, more specifically, to the infinite possibility of aesthetic form manifested in reflection. “Intellectual intuition is thinking that produces its object,” Benjamin notes, “reflection in the Romantics’ sense, however, is thinking that produces its form.”⁴ What is more, if reflection produces form, form for the Romantics is, as Benjamin says, the “possibility of reflection in the work” (67; 156). Thus Romantic reflection in Benjamin’s study produces a theory of the work of art as a medium of possibility. Benjamin begins his study by contrasting Romantic reflection and the more Cartesian interpretation of reflection offered by Fichte, and he draws the contrast in terms of action. With the Cartesian ego, as inflected by a theory of dialectical self-positioning (again, in this case, as represented by Fichte), reflection occurs as a single, realized act. It is, Benjamin says, a *fait accompli*—what Fichte calls an “actual deed” [*eine Tathandlung*], adopting what had been at the time a juridical term that distinguished between a completed or real act as opposed to an intended or potential one.⁵ So, while Fichte appears to take up the topic of Kantian reflection in relation to the ego, reflection is in fact subordinated

4. Walter Benjamin, *Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 25; “Concept of Criticism,” in *Selected Writings*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 128. Hereafter, subsequent references are cited parenthetically, with the page number for the German provided first, followed by the English.

5. “Tathandlung,” in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter (Basel: Schwabe and Co. Verlag, 1974).

to dialectical positing. As Benjamin puts it, "Reflection is not the method of Fichtean philosophy; this is, rather, to be seen in dialectical positing [*dialektischen Setzens*]. . . . For what in Fichte occurs in only a 'single' case . . . takes place, according to the Romantic intuition, incessantly, and first of all constitutes not the object but the form, the infinite and purely methodical character of true thinking" (24–25; 128). In contrast with the fait accompli of dialectical self-positing, Romantic reflection on the work, that is to say, critique, is an incomplete act. Critique for the German Romantics is not the expression of the subject or of the collective—it is neither subjective nor social "opinion," "impressions," et cetera. It is also not the identification of the idea of beauty in the work, or the divining of the "immediate inspired emotion" of the author (100; 177). Instead, criticism is the completion or the representation (*Darstellung*) of the work: "The subject," Benjamin says, "represents [*darstellt*] an objective moment in the work" (78; 163).

What is represented by such "objective moments" is the work of art as medium. The stress on mediacy once again distinguishes the Romantic theory of art from the dialectical self-positing of Fichte. In the end, Benjamin argues, the difference between Romantic reflection and dialectical positing in Fichte comes down to the fact that the latter seeks to destroy the infinitude of the former with a theory of immediacy—the immediacy of self-consciousness. "Fichte looks for and finds," Benjamin says, "an attitude of mind in which self-consciousness is already immediately [*unmittelbar*] present. . . . In the absolute 'I' the infinity of reflection is overcome [*überwunden*]" (20–21; 125).⁶ Instead of destroying the infinity of reflection through the dialectical positing of self-consciousness, the Romantic theory of aesthetic form *multiplies* reflection through criticism. For the Romantics, then, the potentiality of the work to be itself depends on its mediacy. Or, we might say, from the perspective of criticism, the work of art is the medium of its potential existence. On this point Benjamin summons Hölderlin: "Among human beings, in the case of every thing [*Ding*], we must above all look to see that it is something [*Etwas*—in other words, that is knowable in the medium [*moyen*] of its appearance" (98; 176).⁷ That something *is*, in other words, means that it is knowable in the medium of its appearance. Such mediacy of the work, the potential quality that allows it to be taken up in critique, is what the Romantics called "the criticizability of the work" [*die Kritisierbarkeit des Werkes*].

6. It is stripped of its infinity (Benjamin also says *entkleidet*), as if the infinity depended on the appearance or *Schein* of a garment, also a figure for translation in Benjamin.

7. Hölderlin provides the French *moyen* in parentheses in his text.

But what are the consequences of this insistence on critical potentiality, on “criticizability,” when it comes to the question of a Romantic theory of aesthetic value and of the concept of the work? There are, Benjamin goes on, three consequences of “criticizability” for the question of evaluating or judging (*Beurteilung*) works of art. Let us leave aside the second and third—the principle of the “impossibility of a positive scale of values” and that of the “uncriticizability” of inferior works—in order to focus on the first, from which the other two derive, namely, “the principle of the *mediacy of judgment*” [*Mittelbarkeit der Beurteilung*]. Here is Benjamin’s explanation:

The first principle . . . affirms that the judgment of a work must never be explicit, but rather must always be implicit in the fact of its Romantic critique (that is, its reflection). For the value of a work [*Wert des Werkes*] depends solely on whether it makes its immanent critique possible or not. If this is possible—if there is present in the work a reflection that can unfold itself, absolutize itself, and resolve itself in the medium of art—then it is a work of art. The mere criticizability of a work demonstrates on its own the positive value judgment [*Werturteil*] made concerning it; and this judgment can be rendered not through an isolated inquiry but only by the fact of critique itself [*durch das Faktum der Kritik selbst*], because there is no other standard, no other criterion for the presence of a reflection than the possibility of its fruitful unfolding, which is called criticism. (74; 159–60)

The concept of the “critical fact” is fundamental to the theory of aesthetic value and aesthetic judgment that Benjamin draws out of the Romantics. And, in keeping with the conservation principles outlined earlier, the “critical fact” is itself fundamentally divisible—split between the fore- and after-history of the work’s critical completion. It is, to repeat, neither the expression of subjective or social “opinion,” nor the identification of the idea of beauty in the work, nor the divining of the “immediate inspired emotion” of the author. And yet it is still, the Romantics persist in saying, a judgment of value (*ein Werturteil*). Benjamin cites Friedrich Schlegel: “A true judgment of art . . . is always a critical fact, if I may speak this way. But it is also only a fact, and, for just this reason, to wish to motivate [*motivieren*] it is a vain endeavor, for the motive [*Motiv*] itself would then have to contain a new fact or a closer determination of the first fact” (102; 178). Critical facts are, in other words, irreducibly mediate and, Schlegel insists, subject to the principle of divisibility. They are also, for this reason, fundamentally a matter of potentiality, as Benjamin, for his part, suggests at the end of his study:

"In the final account this assessment of [Romantic] criticism rests on the completely positive evaluation of its medium, prose. The legitimation of criticism—which counterposes criticism as the objective instance of all poetic production, depends upon its prosaic nature" (98; 176). The program for the coming philosophy of art prepared by the Romantics, Benjamin appears to say matter-of-factly here, is critical prose. Benjamin's study of Romanticism, we might add, aims to represent nothing more or less than this critical fact. It shows how the stress on the potentiality of the aesthetic medium in Romantic thought carries it beyond the categories of classical aesthetics.

The principle of potentiality at the crux of Benjamin's study of German Romantic aesthetic criticism continues to guide his later works of cultural criticism, of which *The Arcades Project* is the most daring elaboration. Let me offer just two illustrations. The first is the approach taken to the collective in these later writings. As we have noted, a certain classic concept of what might be called the aesthetic collective—a self-consistent community that expresses a regulative idea of beauty—is rejected by the Romantic theory of the aesthetic medium. Benjamin reposes this question in his later work on aesthetics and mass culture, but he does so in a manner that is in keeping with the German Romantic stress on potentiality. Mass movements, Benjamin argues, force us to speak of a collective, not as self-consistent or self-conscious individual subjects but as masses—of readers who become receptive en masse. This is what Benjamin was moved to call the "distracted public" [*zerstreute Publikum*], which constitutes the peculiar collectivity of mass culture.⁸ Because its very condition of possibility is a state of being scattered [*zerstreut*]⁹—distracted rather than concentrated on a unifying end—the mass public is truest to itself when it has yet actually to take shape, in other words, when it remains a potential or, as Benjamin might say, a virtual collective. This is the "dreaming collective" pursued in the nineteenth-century *passages parisiens* of *The Arcades Project*: a public that can never fully wake up to its own possibility, not even in the light of retrospective historical analysis, a dormant collective, as it were, stirring in the mass of citations that make up the *Passagen-Werk*.⁹

8. Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 1966), 41; "The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1978), 241. "Distracted" echoes the sense of being scattered in the German *zerstreuter* better than "absentminded," which is how it appears in the English translation.

9. Heidegger's emphasis on the potentiality of being also leads him to figures of sleep and dreaming in his reflections on "being" in *Der Satz vom Grund* (Neske: Pfullingen, 1957), 97:

This brings me to my second example—the concept of the work as it applies to Benjamin’s project. As we have seen, the “medium of reflection” [*Reflexionsmedium*] of which the Romantics speak demands an encounter—a prosaic encounter—with the work that transforms the traditional meaning of this category: one that puts the work to work and, in the indispensability of doing so, exceeds the limits of a classic concept of the work as a self-contained entity. The same may be said of the medium of Benjamin’s *Passagen-Werk*. Indeed, as the contributions to this symposium demonstrate, working with this text means involvement with a work that, strictly speaking, cannot be identified exclusively with Benjamin. Often in the essays presented here citations from Benjamin’s text are also citations of Joseph Joubert, Louis Aragon, André Monglond, Auguste Blanqui, Marx, and many others. And this is entirely legitimate. Just as the title *The Arcades Project* (Benjamin, by the way, had several “working” titles, in fact) does not signify a self-contained work, so the name *Benjamin* that is attached to it does not designate a self-conscious, univocal authorial subject. Working with *The Arcades Project*, then, means becoming involved not with a self-consistent text and author but rather with a “criticizable” field of textual relations that refuses to be enclosed by these classical categories. The essays presented here attest to the potentiality of this field; they are an open set of what Benjamin—or rather Schlegel—would call “critical facts” that begins to make the question of what *The Arcades Project* is into a matter of the potentiality of what it might *become*.

“The sleep of being” (*Schlaf des Seins*), Heidegger notes, means that it is not yet “awake” [*erwacht*] as such. Under these conditions, we cannot catch a glimpse of what being has “fore-dreamed” [*vorausgeträumt*].

**Come Softly, Darling, Hear What I Say: Listening in a State
of Distraction—A Tribute to the Work of Walter Benjamin,
Elvis Presley, and Robert Christgau**

Lindsay Waters

All knowledge, the totality of all questions and all answers, is contained in the dog.

— Franz Kafka

Outside of a dog, a man's best friend is a book. Inside of a dog, it's very dark.

— Groucho Marx

My mother groan'd! my father wept.
Into the dangerous world I leapt;
Helpless, naked, piping loud,
Like a fiend hid in a cloud.

— William Blake, "Infant Sorrow"

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I wanna be your dog.
—The Stooges

The year 1955 marks the emergence of rock 'n' roll from the shadows into the bright lights.¹ It is also the year that the rules of music changed. To steal and change a line from Mallarmé: *On a touché a la musique* (They have tampered with music). The manner in which music was produced and how it was received changed drastically in ways we still hardly recognize, partly because this is recent history and partly because the changes are still being resisted.

We need an overall understanding of the change in order to properly mark it. I think Walter Benjamin's ideas about the way art gets transmogrified in the modern era provides the basis for that understanding. Benjamin was the first to acknowledge that the machine fundamentally changed the arts. The machine has been thrust into the heart of the process, so finally we have a chance to get rid of the high-mindedness about the arts that has always poisoned reflection about art.² One might have imagined that the changes that follow from the new possibilities for producing and receiving art would have hit the oldest arts—for example, music—first; but that is not what happened. These fresh possibilities first became apparent in new arts like photography and film, and then percolated into the other arts. But this mutation of the arts has also led many to raise the same questions about music as it was transformed that they asked about photography and film. Are these practices art? If they are art, aren't they bad art? No art can emerge or be revamped without an army of militant traditionalists rising up to say that our very humanity is threatened if we just let these new and unsavory practices thrive. And the traditionalists are right: It is our very humanity that

1. I refer the reader to two accounts of why 1955 is the year: Robert Christgau, "Across the Great Divide: Nat King Cole," in his *Grown Up All Wrong: 75 Great Rock and Pop Artists from Vaudeville to Pop* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 17–21; W. T. Lhamon Jr., *Deliberate Speed: The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s* (1990; reprint, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

2. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 1935–1938, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); and see also Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Third Version," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003). See also my "Walter Benjamin's Dangerous Idea," in my work-in-progress, *The Critique of Pure Hipness: The Work of Affect and Experience in the Production of Souls*.

is at stake in the coaxing of these new arts to life. All true art and all true criticism occur in the mode of crisis.

Robert Christgau has written that most of us who are old enough to have been listening to radio in 1955—therefore old enough to undergo a revolution in our aesthetic preferences—cherish the idea that a great schism took place that year. Indeed, the shift was epochal.³ Music underwent the transformation that had been inaugurated with photography in the nineteenth century and with movies in the early years of the twentieth. The big question, then, is whether the coming of these new arts “had not changed the entire question of art,” to borrow from Benjamin. Because music existed before rock ‘n’ roll did, when rock emerged to alter music, many wanted to deny that it was either music or art. Disdain seemed reasonable, but it was not.

All the popular arts are part of a general effort to establish new equilibriums between humans and their tools and their world. The doubts persist for the high-minded, whose godfather is aesthetic theoretician Theodor Adorno, who railed against the ravages of “regressive hearing.” But rather than take that tack, it seems more productive to wonder why music and the arts underwent such a massive sea change in 1955. Moviemaking transformed the history of art because in moviemaking the undeniable centrality of the machine, the camera, in the production of movies, transformed the way humans and things interacted to produce art. A new democracy was brought about in which humans could no longer act superior to the materials and tools they used to produce art, and this led to a revolution in the reception of art.

The great arts of the twentieth century have given rise to a goodly number of great critics, including T. S. Eliot, Pauline Kael, Francois Truffault, Lu Xun, Robert Warshow, Lester Bangs, Greil Marcus, and Robert Christgau. And there has been no systematic consideration of these arts that does justice to them, except by critics such as the ones I have named and Walter Benjamin. Of course, it is always the case that the greatest theoreticians of the arts have always been the critics who rose up to defend those arts from their detractors at the time of their birth. The prime example of this is Aristotle defending the new art of the drama against the attack of Plato. No art theory is ever more advanced or sophisticated than the finest criticism of its day. Theory is the criticism that survives to live another day as tools valuable to future critics.

3. Christgau, *Grown Up All Wrong*, 17.

But, to go back to the beginning of rock, consider this question: Who was the genius in the Sun Recording Studio? Was it Elvis or was it Sam Phillips? Robert Christgau suggests a parity between the two, contending that Elvis is “the most underrated record producer in the history of rock ‘n’ roll.”⁴ The most effective works of popular art are made when no component of the production—in movies, for example, the director, the stars, the camera, or the stage props—gains priority over the others. Only when there is true parity does affecting art emerge, as it did in August and September 1954, when Elvis and Phillips recorded for hours and hours. Phillips managed to help Elvis become so unaware of the microphone and so relaxed about recording that he had a chance to catch him off guard in that studio, not “performing.” There was no single genius whose control made “Good Rockin’ Tonight” the achievement it was. What we had instead was Phillips using the studio to maximum effect to pull the stuff out of Elvis in a way that worked on record.⁵ “Everyone was trying very hard, but everyone⁵ was trying to hang very loose through the whole thing,” Phillips’s assistant, Marion Keisker, remembered.⁶

The way Elvis emerged as an artist out of Mississippi was just the opposite of the way Michelangelo caused the figure of David to emerge from the block of marble from which he carved his statue. Benjamin writes, “For the Greeks, whose art depended on the production of eternal values, the pinnacle of all the arts was the form least capable of improvement, sculpture.”⁷ Recorded music of the sort Elvis made was subject to infinite improvement. The artist in the time of Michelangelo tried to make art as if the divinity spoke through him. The artist in the time of Jackson Pollock might still glory in a sort of divine inspiration, but his work looked not like something he’d brought down from heaven for humans to worship but like a toss-off. In rock, as in the movies, the greatest effects were almost always achieved by acting as little as possible. “I don’t act. I react” were the watchwords of the greatest actresses and actors. The sort of self-doubt and hesitancy Elvis had was an asset in the production of art, as it would not have

4. Christgau, *Grown Up All Wrong*, 56.

5. Greil Marcus is the Virgil to Elvis’s Aeneas. All commentary on Elvis flows from the work of Greil Marcus. See his “Elvis: Presliad,” in *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock ‘n’ Roll*, 4th ed., rev. (New York: Plume, 1997), 120–75.

6. Peter Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994), 133.

7. Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version,” *Selected Writings*, vol. 3, 109.

been for Michelangelo when he was duking it out with Pope Julius II about how he was going to execute the painting of the walls of the Sistine Chapel. The microphone, the electric guitars, and all the tools of the studio combined seamlessly with Elvis, thanks to his own gift—if I can put it that way—of self-alienation, his own discomfort with himself, his own fragile sense of selfhood. In those early sessions at Sun, Elvis was not going to lord it over the scene as if he were some kind of superstar like Michelangelo. He was so unguarded that he was prepared to rise to Sam Phillips's effort to generate fun in the studio. As one of the participants declared afterwards, "Sam's one organizing principle was that it had to be fun."⁸

I want to pause to remark on the fragility, call it tenderness, I see everywhere evident in Elvis's work. When thinking about Elvis getting started, we have to wonder how he felt he could speak or sing in his own voice. Because he became such a dominant voice in America, it is very hard to think of him without it or as anxious and hesitant about using it. Elvis stood on the shoulders of a clutch of men and women who, though not midgets, certainly would find it strange, even now from the grave, to hear themselves called giants—Jimmy Rogers, Bill Monroe, Hank Williams. All of them knew how hard it was for a hillbilly to hold his head high. Takes a worried man to sing a worried song. These were men, especially Williams, for whom speaking out loud and sustaining a song was the hardest job. That song by Tennessee Ernie Ford, "Sixteen Tons," must be partly about the singer's life and the difficulty of crawling out from beneath a burden that seems most days to weigh at least sixteen tons. But the joyful news Elvis brought us is that each of us can throw off that sixteen-ton burden and walk free, even naked, before a vast public. How did anyone, let alone a poor country boy, learn to walk in such freedom in a country populated by card sharks and seductive chicks who'd rob a rube blind? It's a Darwinian dog-eat-dog world out there, which is why most of us retreat into our bourgeois interior to seek comfort when we're not out there.

The intimacy Sam Phillips allowed to emerge between Elvis and the machinery of the studio—the machinery and the guys, the small, cozy space that was like the inside of a home and also like the inside of a chapel or a revival tent—was crucial. When Elvis first dared sing to friends in their homes when he was a high schooler, he insisted that the lights be out so no one could see him. He was a sincerely religious person through and through. The English poet John Milton was a deeply religious man like Elvis. We

8. Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 133.

know Milton for the grandiloquence of his poetry, a poetry that will inspire poets and rebels—and especially poet-rebels—for as long as the English language is spoken, but Milton was possessed by two drives that pulled him in opposite directions. One was to make his voice heard and to make it prevail, and the other was to have his voice folded into a choir. To feel these two drives the way he did was to feel pulled apart by two teams of champion horses, one side animated by his “desire for absorption into deity” (that is, to join the heavenly choir), and the other, “the desire to experience (and record) that desire as no one before him ever” had (that is, to sing out bravely alone).⁹ Elvis was no less passionate, and his passions pulled him the same way, so it hurt him to step out of the choir at his mother and father’s church and hear only his own voice resounding through a hall; but at the same time, this is what he craved.

Elvis was so strong, and he was so fragile. He was an invisible man who might have believed that to arrogate a voice to himself was blasphemy, but to find a voice within the choir was okay because the person singing so loudly and so passionately was not “me” but “my master in me.” Singing with religious fervor was okay because it is a way of singing of yourself without risking falling into the sin of pride. Elvis’s lack of self esteem is a notable fact that he himself did not hide. So to sing, he had to overcome modesty. He also had to overcome fear. An interviewer once asked him whether he’d ever thought to categorize the type of singing he did, and Elvis said no. Why not, asked the interviewer? “Cause I’m scared, know what I mean, honey? Real scared.”¹⁰ Kafka, in his “Investigations of a Dog,” has his narrator speak about how he marveled at the achievement of the amazing dancing, singing dogs this way: “I was less surprised by the artistry of the seven dogs . . . than by their courage in facing so openly the music of their own making.” They had overcome their own sense of sin, which made it possible for the narrator to overcome his own sense of sin in taking delight in their music.¹¹ I have a sense of what it cost Elvis to sing and dance the way he did in public, out in the open, and so I marvel all the more at his using the freedom we say we treasure in the United States but so seldom exercise precisely because we, as sensible people, are afraid, just as afraid as Elvis was. This freedom, really defiance, is most conspicuous in Elvis’s “Hound Dog.”¹²

9. Stanley Fish, *How Milton Works* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 255.

10. Guralnick, *Last Train to Memphis*, 269.

11. Franz Kafka, “Investigations of a Dog,” in *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 282, 285.

12. I am happy to find support for the interpretation of the song that follows from an essay

Elvis had acquired Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller's "Hound Dog" from some other traveling musicians, Freddie Bell and the Bellboys, out in Las Vegas in April and May 1956, at the time of his disastrous and humiliating first appearances in Las Vegas, and he sang the song most memorably on the *Steve Allen Show*, on 1 July 1956. What transpired when Elvis sang the song on the *Milton Berle Show* was just preparation for the Allen show.¹³ The talk to the audience in Las Vegas—recorded and easily available on the collection of Elvis's '50s master tapes—is filled with self-deprecating remarks. He refers to his newest song, "Heartbreak Hotel," the first recorded for RCA on his own without his partner Sam Phillips, as "Heartburn Hotel." Is the loneliness he conveys in this echoey performance an expression of the sadness he must have felt having to go it alone without Sam? The song is deeply mournful and exposes such grief at being bereft, I think his sadness about leaving Sun Records, Sam, and Marion Keisker all come through in this recording. This is a man who thinks it is likely that he is worthless. And alone, by himself, he is certainly worthless. You can hear it in the recording of his performance of the song in Las Vegas. But when he came into the enemy camp, up to New York City for the Allen show, his pride buoyed him up, like the way Muhammad Ali's pride came to his rescue in Zaire fighting George Foreman. His real master was Hank Williams, whose achy/breaky sound he'd made his own but whose struggle for soul survival had failed when he sank into drink.

The way Elvis sang "Hound Dog" on the Allen show, and then recorded it shortly thereafter, was very different from the way he usually sang. His singing usually was a marvel of mobility, with his voice going all over the place in a song from high to low in pitch—just like Williams—but really going all over the place in terms of emotional range, as strong as a mountain or as weak as a willow tree, as tame as a baby or as wild as the raging sea. Sarah Vaughan's voice has a range of about five and a quarter octaves, surpassing even Beverly Sills and Leontyne Price, whose range was five octaves. Elvis's range was about two and a quarter octaves, as measured by musical notation, but his voice had an emotional range from

I read too late to fully take advantage of: Peter Nazareth, "Elvis as Anthology," in Vernon Chadwick, ed., *In Search of Elvis: Music, Race, Art, Religion* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997), 37–72. This is a great essay that takes up many issues about Elvis that I have not touched on. I thank Ben Sounders for calling the essay to my attention.

13. For a different interpretation that gives much more weight to the Milton Berle appearances, see the very valuable Gilbert B. Rodman, *Elvis After Elvis: The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 148–56.

tender whispers and sighs down to shouts, grunts, grumbles, and sheer gruffness that could move the listener from calmness and surrender to fear. His voice cannot be measured in octaves but must be measured in decibels; even that, though, misses the problem of how to measure delicate whispers that are hardly audible at all. What he lacks in sheer musical range he makes up for in attack, by the way he lays behind the beat to the way he jumps ahead of it to express an anger at being treated like worthless white trash, which Williams never expressed. He could take his auditors by surprise by leaping out of the gutter and grabbing them by their throats by means of his use of guttural sounds.

Elvis's way of singing is notable for the way he disarticulates the sounds of words. Most singers let each word have its own integrity. With a singer like Jimmy Rogers, the stretching out of a line comes at the end of a line, not through the whole course of it, the way Elvis sings:

Got/a/wo/man/way/over/town/shee/hees/a/good/to/me/oooh/yeah
 I'll/be/a/so/lone/ly/ba/bee/ah/could/die
 whey-hey-hell imuh imuh imuh imuh dreamin uva a whwhite CHRIZZ-
 mussss

Elvis's lines pitch the way a ship pitches at sea, with the bow alternately plunging down precipitously and then heaving up abruptly. Country music, especially now, articulates the words clearly because some clever wit in the use of language is usually what gives the song its point, like the cleverness of Patty Loveless's song that says "You Can Feel Bad (If It Makes You Feel Better)" or the old one by Roger Miller in which the singer says "I am a man of means by no means, king of the road." The smartness of the lyric takes away a lot of the emotional punch after you've listened to it twenty-five times or more. People have wondered why it doesn't seem to matter that Elvis didn't write any of his songs. It's because with him the delivery is everything.

In contrast to the way most of his songs work, "Hound Dog" is a rant with the steady drone of either the backup singers or the rhythm guitars sending up a dreadful, steady, metallic racket over which Elvis begins yelling and chastising the dog for being nothing but a dumb brute. The song moves forward relentlessly like a freight train bearing down on some poor soul whose been tied to the tracks. What Elvis and his band are really like is a line of tanks entering a suburban Westchester County town. But the auditor of the song is not the only creature in trouble. Elvis charges that the hound dog is worthless, just hangs around cryin' all the time. The dog has never caught a rabbit, like a good hunting dog is supposed to do; it's never

done anything useful. The same could be said about Elvis. He doesn't have a job that is respectable; he moans, croons, groans, and cries in churches and county fairs about love and loss, mostly loss. And what he does, mostly, is cry—let loose his emotions in a country where stoicism is the norm. The worth of the dog consists of his being the subject of a song, and Elvis's worth consists in his singing a song about something worthless. That is why, presumably, Steve Allen thought he could invite Elvis on his show and set him up to be ridiculed for the entertainment of the respectable and genteel.¹⁴ But Elvis turned the song on Steve Allen by being so angry, and yet game, game for the funny show of singing to a live dog in front of all of America; and then, all of a sudden, the words “you said you were high class, but that was just a lie” seem to be addressed not at all to the dog but to Steve Allen himself, a man of supposed courtesy and good manners—the Master of Ceremoniousness—who brought this country bumpkin on the show to humiliate him, suspecting that Elvis was so stupid, being such a hayseed and all, that he would not even suspect Steve Allen of what he was doing. To go back to the words of Blake I quoted as an epigraph: Naked, piping, but not helpless, the fiend leapt forth *out of* the cloud for all to see.

The event must have been hideous to go through for Elvis, but at the same time it proved to be one of the great acts of agitprop theater ever performed in the twentieth century, and the fool turned out to be the supposed wise and genteel man on whom Elvis turned the table. What should he have done? Should he have sung to Steve Allen another song he recorded at the same session in Nashville on 2 July 1956, “Anything You Want Me to Be (That's Exactly What I'll Be)”? I don't think so. No, instead he took the sixteen tons of stone and made a wall for all of Steve Allen's pretentiousness to crash into, and that is exactly what happened. I remember that night. We lived on a farm up at the dead end of a road. Where that gravel road turned off the blacktop, lower-rent houses sheltered hillbillies and Mexicans up from the South. A babysitter from one of those houses was the one who turned me on to Elvis when she switched the dial of our radio from WMAQ to WJJD, the station that played Elvis. But when we watched Elvis on the Allen show in our living room, my mother encouraged us to join Allen in the ridicule of Elvis. It was an electric moment of shock and distance. My mother promoted propriety, and I was frozen just as Steve Allen must have hoped I'd be. But for the fans who knew just how sweet and tender Elvis could really be, they savored the machine gun of the guitars turned against Allen that night.

14. On Elvis on the *Steve Allen Show*, see Karal Ann Marling, *Graceland: Going Home with Elvis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 106.

The struggle to gain a voice that would not break down in public is part of what made it seem right that in much of his music Elvis's voice was cracking. But in this case he mixed comedy and cruelty, used his own alienation from himself to gain a commanding position from which to attack Allen. He'd allowed himself to be "used" by Allen, seeming to be just as passive a person as Allen supposed him to be, but by playing his role to the hilt, getting dressed up in the tux and tails to allow the scene to be ludicrous, by expressing his anger through humor, by playing along with Allen, he pushed through his very alienation from WASP structures of feeling in New England and elsewhere to a point where he could strike back effectively and publicly. By taking the chance of utter humiliation and social death—by shooting the moon, in other words—he'd bet his whole life that he'd conquer Steve Allen at his own game. The growing audience for Elvis knew that his most important effects on them were produced by accident, seemingly, and by playing off his own passivity—what he called his tenderness. Some in the audience would have been alert to this and knew that listening and watching Elvis demanded a real effort, because it is the most indistinct gestures that reach the audience and that the audience must be attuned to. The things that really matter have to be caught as they rush by. Such things are expressed but not meant for anyone's ears, so they might be totally indistinct. The concept of "gestus," which Walter Benjamin uses in discussing Kafka, is relevant here. Elvis's animal gestures combine "the utmost mysteriousness with the utmost simplicity."¹⁵ Elvis was aware that his own animal gestures linked him to the dog in the minds of people who owned television sets. Since his parents had not been able to afford a radio when he was growing up, he knew what demographic (as we say nowadays) he was playing to that Sunday night in 1956, and so he got up real close to the dog and held it, and then turned his head out to the audience staring at them, challenging them to respond. Taken by surprise, the audience laughed out loud in embarrassment. Elvis had caught them. He had turned the table.

Elvis played up the song. After all, there's something weird straight

15. Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka," in *Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings*, vol. 2, 1927–1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 802. Underlying my thinking in parts of this essay is the work of Miriam Hansen, most especially her essay "Of Mice and Ducks: Benjamin and Adorno on Disney," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 92 (1993): 27–61. I have also found very helpful a book she pointed me to: James Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). Lastra has a very helpful discussion of "the newly valued attitude of perceptual and representational 'passivity'" (53).

off to have a man singing a woman's song about her anger at a man. He played the song out to its fully ridiculous potential. The question was this: If you dared sing in your own voice, a voice in which you exposed your whole emotional range, how could you keep yourself from being made a fool of? Well, you can't stop other people from thinking what they think, but you can challenge them. Elvis stood for the right of us all to expose our most naked emotions to the world without ridicule. To do that he did actually have to take on the protectors of propriety, and there was not a better exemplar of respectability in those days than Steve Allen. He was certainly one of my mom's champions. Seeing Elvis's bravery in front of Allen is what licensed us in his audience then, and much later, to enjoy our own feelings together with other people and not just at home alone.

That night in July, the cozy bourgeois interior—the area where frightened members of the striving middle class like my family go to lick their wounds—was torched by a song-and-dance routine, which the audience was not allowed to see because it was deemed too dangerous to public morality. That's why Allen put Elvis in the zoot suit, so he would not be able to scoot around the stage. A safe haven was lost, but a friend, a loved one, was gained in the figure of Elvis. (Is it any wonder that the living room of the U.S. household atrophied from this point on in time and became a withered limb, a room few enter, let alone live in, as family rooms became bigger and bigger?) The freedom he offered us was the chance to throw off the armor we felt we needed to engage in that dog-eat-dog world that awaited us each morning when we went to school or work. It was a dream of freedom he asked us to share, but one we knew was real at least for Elvis, because it was only too evident that he had had to fight to win the right to sing his song. What thrills me is his courage in facing so openly the music of his own making—and thereby crashing through all the forces that would have left him forever alienated from himself. If he can have a voice, then so can I. Can't I? That's why "Hound Dog" has been for me, and remains for me, like barbed wire that rips a hole in my pant leg, lacerating skin, drawing blood, just the way barbed wire does to me when I fail to get around it and it snags me. Through that hole pours all the subversive energy of Elvis and history.

Rock caused a wholesale transformation in the production of art; it provoked just as drastic a change in the reception of art. Fun would have to be at its heart. Fun cannot be commanded. It can rise up freely out of people interacting together if and only if they feel they are not being forced to cooperate. "Fun" is what people call the affect that rises up in them when

they suddenly realize they are reacting in concert, but not in lockstep, with a large quantity of other people.

We have a very good sense of what people do when they feel the sense of infectious fun overtake them: They dance. Here is David Johansen: "I can't get the kind of love that I need, so let's just dance!"¹⁶ Dancing is the body's description of the fun it feels, but we have very few descriptions of what the process is like that people go through to reach the point where they can say they are being affected by music and jump onto the dance floor. What is listening like? One of the rare accounts of what it is like to listen to rock is a statement Christgau wrote for a most ephemeral publication, a freebie magazine that mixed ads with feature stories for *Borders Bookstore*. Nothing could be more transient, but then again nothing could be more transient than the process Christgau wrote about for the magazine. At first Christgau seems to be a bit defensive that the music he listens to is not classical music. He writes: "People often wonder what I listen for in music. . . . Maybe someone trained in sonata-allegro procedure has the discipline to ignore transient pleasures and proceed immediately to structure. Maybe someone who reads music can establish stringent criteria of melodic originality. Maybe someone with perfect pitch applies that standard, poor upright soul. But like most pop fans, I don't have such fancy equipment at my command. So I don't listen for anything. I just try to make sure that music I like finds me." How does he do this?

I just keep my CD changer filled morning til night, usually too often, my family reminds me, with recent product. Working from past performance and hearsay and hunches and the charts and what other reviewers say, I process dozens of records a day, many for a second or fifth or tenth time. At the outset I focus in on details only when the music demands it—a rare but treasured occurrence. More often, I wait until I catch myself reacting to a newly imprinted snatch of melody, moving my body or mind to a groove, enjoying a funny rhyme or a pithy turn of phrase, humming along, lying in bed with a song I can't pin down ringing in my head.¹⁷

In an interview for *Salon*, Christgau said something that expands upon what he said for *Borders's* magazine: "You have to know when you're feeling pleasure, and then you have to be honest with yourself and look into

16. David Johansen, "Frenchette," from his album *David Johansen* (Sony Music, 1978).

17. Robert Christgau, "Not-so-Hidden Treasures: Village Voice Critic Robert Christgau on the Ear for Pop/Rock," *Inside Borders*, November 1998, 25.

yourself until you figure out why it is exactly that you like [the tune].”¹⁸ Blaise Pascal wrote that he who reads too quickly reads not at all. That is perfectly correct about reading, but it is absolutely incorrect about listening to rock music. One has to listen to it in a distracted way, not concentrating on its musical form, in order to listen to it correctly.

Christgau has given us a precise account of the sort of reception that is right for music produced the way Elvis’s music was produced. Phillips found a way of catching Elvis interacting with the machinery by theft, as it were. And it is by theft, in the still of the night, when the recipient is alone and a melody comes back to him or her, that the music finds the audience that rock has reshaped in its image and likeness. Quietly and softly, music comes back to us and finds us in those moments when our hearts rise up to find it again, wanting it to return. “Come softly, darling, hear what I say. Come to me. Stay. You’re my obsession forever and a day.”

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The way in which the pop arts are produced and disseminated has increased vastly the number of people who are now the patrons of art, and it has changed the mode of participation in the artwork. It has changed the way we enter it, and the way it enters us, so when it comes back, it comes back from inside us. Because this new mode of participation first emerged with lowly, vulgar forms of art, it has confused people, especially the elite and the genteel. The elite cannot believe that casual noticing, as opposed to attentive observation, could be the correct way to respond to art.¹⁹ The reason no particular attention is required is because the focus of attention shifts from the artwork to the recipient. What the artwork has lost in depth and complexity—those old words of praise used by traditional aesthetics—has been gained by its recipients. The pop tune that comes back to us from earlier listening is a tune that has, as it were, dropped an anchor into our souls. That it has found a firm grip in us tells us not just about the work but about ourselves.

My point is not that all the attention has swung to the other side of the equation but rather that we should think of the relation between humans

18. Barbara O’Dair, “A Conversation with Robert Christgau,” *Salon.com*, 9 May 2001, available at www.salon.com/ent/music/int/2001/05/09/xgau/index.html.

19. The Top 40 itself was a method that allowed the registering of the responses of vast numbers of people to artworks by calling in to radio stations. The Top 40 was a mode of democratic listening. I am interested in the way the sharing of aesthetic experiences leads to the reconfiguring of social relations.

and artworks as interactions (a key word in Christgau's writings). Christgau is brilliant on the singers that seem to have no depth—for example, George Jones and Stevie Wonder or Elvis—because he rightly sees their grip on their audiences as more revealing than that of masters of the arts of depth—for example, Bob Dylan. Christgau has made it a point to allow the artworks to possess him. The playback, the feedback, that matters to him is the one that comes out of the amplifier inside me. For this reason, he focuses on the moment of the response emerging as if unprompted.

The reason why the aesthetics of pop could be so important for the rethinking of all aesthetics is because, in the end, Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* is not deeper or more complex than Stevie Wonder's "Superstition." Looking at how we respond to the popular arts such as rock 'n' roll reveals something essential about art, long obscured by most talk of aesthetics, which is that it is the interaction of all the elements involved in the production—from the CD player to my stomach—that matter, and that if I am not centrally involved in the process it doesn't matter a wit what the critics say. High fidelity is fidelity to myself, but the nature of myself is something I discover only when I see how far down a song can drop an anchor in my soul. This is not hipness; this is my soul responding because a place has been found between me and the music where my whole world seems to flood back in, and the rush of it makes me want to get up and dance.

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